

play



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Indiana Jones
Warhawk
Super Mario Galaxy
Castlevania Portrait of Ruin
Tokobot Plus
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Splinter Cell Double Agent
Heavenly Sword
Resistance: Fall of Man
BioShock
Haze
The Darkness
Super Paper Mario
Eragon
Justice League Heroes
Arthur and the Minimoys
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Final Fantasy XII
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MON, 25, 0000 to 01, 0000

"Prey looks like one of the best first-person shooters of the year in both graphics and gameplay." —IGN

"Absolutely incredible to look at, packed with scintillating effects." - Play

"Doom 3 hiked the bar. Prey may transform the bar altogether." —TUP

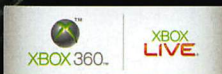
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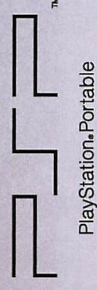
BLADE DANCER

LINEAGE OF LIGHT

Available in July 2006



Fantasy Violence
Language



PlayStation®Portable

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Art by: LeSean Thomas

Letter from the Editor

Wii all win?

If console gaming is a competition like the Hollywood box office and the Nielsens, then E3 has presented one helluva conundrum. Going in, I was convinced I'd emerge to declare a "winner" and proclaim to the world who I (or we, in the event that we all agreed) thought would reign supreme for the generation ahead. But a funny thing happened on the way to this issue. After the lights went down, the makeshift habitats were packed back into their crates, and the party girls went back to their waitressing jobs, I found myself, for the first time, a true believer in three different machines.

Beginning with Sony—the most scrutinized of the big three—while drawing any technological conclusions based on a system's E3 debut would be futile, I do believe they had an amazing debut. Just as comparing last year's 360 offering to this year's is like night and day, future generations of PS3 games will obviously appear far superior, but that wasn't the issue regarding PS3. It's the price that has everyone in a tizzy. Sony is clearly after the early adopters, which outnumber the number of systems they'll likely be able to produce at launch by a wide margin. Find me a gamer who wouldn't donate blood to get a PS3 and I'll find you a vampire. When you're sitting on the number one console on planet Earth, which is enjoying its twilight years to record sales and some of the best games ever created, the need to release a low-priced next-generation product that will be outmoded in 24 months is the last thing on Sony's mind. That would be a very un-Sony-like thing to do. Releasing an ultra-high-powered games/multimedia/Blu-Ray DVD player for half of what a Blu-Ray DVD player costs alone however, seems quite apropos for the company that was instrumental in taking gaming from a cottage industry to an American pastime. As with any console, as the user base grows the price will shrink (likely when the PS2 stops stomping every other console into the ground) but for the

time being, did people really expect to pay less than \$500.00 for a machine housing seven cell processors that cost over a billion to develop? Not to mention the multimedia implications and the fact that developers will be unlocking the secrets of this machine for many years to come. It's likely that many a PS3 demo was running off of the core CPU, barely tapping the cells, if at all. Second-, third- (and so and so on) generation PS3 games are going to be pant-wetting, so stock up on Adult Depends. And let us not forget about the two A-Bombs Sony has in its arsenal; MGS4 and FFXIII.

Next up—Microsoft not only weathered the storm, they drove a semi right through it. Talk about a head start; in the past, launching first meant losing steam when the competition caught up, but this go-round, the Xbox 360 outshone the PS3, with games like BioShock and Gears of War and they have the opportunity to drop their price just as a pile of triple-A games hit at holiday, potentially stealing a lot of the PS3's fire. With a projected 6 million users on Live by 2007, Halo 3 and Fable 2 in the pipeline, along with a day and date release for GTA 4, Microsoft has a real opportunity to pull a similar coup on Sony, as Sega once did on Nintendo. The SNES was more powerful (or so they tell me, funny how much better Genesis games looked) but the Genesis won the race. I don't think Microsoft could have had a better show. Sony had no Naughty Dog, Santa Monica Studios, or Sucker Punch game on the floor to challenge Microsoft's stellar '06/'07 cavalcade of power games.

And finally we have the little Wii, perhaps the most brilliant of all next-generation gaming devices. Gaming has grown to such a size that in order to stay in the game, companies must recruit the mass market consumer, and once again—kids. Remember them? I do because E and T games are 90% of all I play. Sony and Microsoft have good

strategies for mall-rats, but Nintendo will OWN the mass market, core gamers, and most importantly Japan, where they won't merely win the race but reinvigorate a stagnating market (outside of the DS). Gamers will own either a 360 and a Wii or a PS3 and a Wii...but single-console families on a budget, especially with kids, will own only a Wii.

As much drool-inducing technology as I witnessed at E3, such as Bioshock, Heavenly Sword, Gears of War and The Darkness, the first thing that pops into my head every morning is wanting to play Mario Galaxy and wax my friends and family at Wii Tennis... Under \$250.00 with Mario and Zelda in the launch window and a completely new way to enjoy games whether you've been playing for 10 years or 10 minutes? Nintendo just took themselves out of "the war" and began waging a whole new battle without an opponent. It's also worth noting that many a Wii game was running on GameCube, so we've yet to see what these games will look like come Q4.

And finally, let us not forget our new best friends the PSP and DS, both of which are shining more brightly than anyone would have ever imagined. Beyond the preservation of 2D franchises like Castlevania and Ghosts 'n Goblins, innovation is alive and well on both systems. Can it be that E3 was a win-win-win-win-win? Wii.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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The latest on Wii and surprise sequels

Cover Story

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

Exclusive first hands-on and character-reveal featuring the lovely Zala the scout, plus interviews and more on SOEs amazing first PS3 game

E3 Awards

Our winners and runners up for the Best of E3 2006

Special Section: Best of E3 2006

30 plus pages of our pick-of-the-litter E3 games

Reviews

Moto GP 2006, Cars, Naruto Ultimate Ninja, X-Men The Official Game and Bits

E3 Interviews

Inafune, Igarashi, Itagaki, Tezuka, Kojima and...BJ Cholewinski?

Play PC

Mike's picks for best PC games of E3

Play Anime

Viewtiful Joe is back for cheese fondue, and much, much more (okay, not that much more)

Now Reading

Basilisk and Beyond the Beyond...Tender.

Media

We bite into Underworld Evolution and Home Movies

Back of the Book

Greg Orlando throws down the best BotB, ever!

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

Generation landslide

I'm not an impatient person, but for a gamer in this day and age, sometimes it takes a bit of waiting for the future to come along, and discover that "next-generation" that we all dream of. But what is the next gen? Wasn't it the Playstation 2? The Dreamcast? The Genesis, after the Master System had its run? The Super Nintendo, in regards to the vanilla NES? From the Wii to the PS3 to the 360--sometimes I just feel like we're evolving faster than need be. I still remember reading a review for Halo online, the week of the release of the original Xbox, and after a laundry list of complaints, the reviewer promptly added, "Well, I guess we'll just have to wait for the Xbox 2." So when that Xbox 2, or 360 in this case, comes around, what are we to expect next? Someday, will Master Chief have killed every breathing alien organism in the galaxy? Will Mario have squashed every goomba in existence, not to mention finding the right castle?

Will Sonic have collected every golden coin, until he just stops running altogether? I suppose what I'm trying to say is, what will happen to us, and our next-generation, when the katamari comes full circle, and rolls everything up into one neat little mess?

Here's to hoping that growing up as a generation of gamers with expectations and experiences to think on for ages, we get turned into one hell of a star. Cheers,

Will H

Floods and Coconuts

I haven't truly liked a gaming magazine since Gamefan. You guys all do great work. Thanks for not giving me a 200-page book of advertisements with a couple of screenshots and articles placed therein (I'm looking at you,) as pacification. That said, I really want to get something off my chest about the upcoming console wars. There will always be smack-talking. Truth of the matter is, competition is good. I have my favorite, as does everyone else. What we need to do as a society of gamers is focus on making sure that we don't get taken for a ride. The industry as a whole is FLOODED with crappy games. Things are starting to wake up a bit with the new generation, but for every Shadow of the Colossus and Halo we get a ton of

throw-away games that never should have made it to the local store shelves. Problem is, if we keep buying them, the industry will only relapse into laziness. Need proof? Go to any game store and just look at how many PS2 games are on the shelves. Now, choose which ones are worth slapping down your hard-earned money for. See what I mean? Microsoft isn't by any means innocent either.

As far as hardware goes, at least Microsoft had the coconuts to admit a few of their systems had problems and offered to repair them. Sony didn't even have the decency to apologize when millions of gamers were turning their Playstations upside down or on their sides to get them to work, or when they got that inevitable "Disk Read Error" on their PS2s. If we're gonna plunk down cold, hard American, we'd better at least get some respect. Who's been the only company to bring out

"Will Sonic have collected every golden coin, until he just stops running altogether?"

solid hardware and software consistently? The same company who gets the least respect: Nintendo. People are excited about the Wii, and that's great. Nintendo should change their name to Reliable. So far, they've been the only ones that are. In the end, there should be no 'console war' among gamers. Leave that to the corporations who are hungry for money. Treasure your 360. Adore your PS3. Worship your Wii (haha). But let's all agree to make the gaming industry work for US.

P.S. Nintendo rules, suckers.

This is an exciting time, people! Everyone is out to get our coin by producing fantastic games. A tear for whimsy passing...

Kathleen and Elias C.

Naughty Dogs and Insomniacs

Well, E3 has come to a close, and what do we discover? Two of this generation's most gifted teams - and more importantly, two teams that have blessed us with countless interactive wonders to get lost in - have decided to dive into the homogeneity of "realism" for their next-gen offerings.

Yes, I speak of Insomniac and Naughty Dog. I'd like to say thank you for the wonderful worlds of sheer imagination that you both gave so many of us the pleasure of getting lost for countless hours within. It is clear that those days have now passed, and there is no future in store for many more hours within new, creative worlds. I hope that your new hardcore, edgy, real-life shooters both give the many gamers with interest in that kind of stuff as much joy as your past fantastical worlds have given me (which I'm sure they will). An honest thank you again, it was a fun ride :D

Justin L

Bad Dream falling

Play,
I love your magazine... It's gorgeous. It's

got games, anime, and more. It's the previews with lots of pictures I like the most in Play. Also, please give us more posters. Posters rock. :) However, when I read a review like that of Dreamfall's in the last issue, it disappoints me. Whoever wrote this either didn't play or didn't like the original (which was a gem of an adventure game with an amazing story and some of the best voice acting I've ever heard). If you let people who do not like the classical adventure genre review classical adventure games, it's an insult to both those who love the genre and to the developers who made the game. Dreamfall is ranked 79% on gamerankings as of now, which is a clear indication that your reviewer missed quite a few things. Sometimes games are clearly badly made (read: Celebrity Deathmatch, Big Rigs, etc... those games shouldn't even have any space on your mag). Dreamfall, however, is not deserving of such a low rating. Had to share my two cents, have a nice day.

Julien

E3 Outsider

As I sit here in the aftermath of one of the most exciting E3s of the last few years, a few questions spring to mind concerning the big 3. Nintendo's Wii (the dumbest name ever) is designed to entice not only the hardcore gamers but to draw in non-gamers as well. From what I have read about the convention, there was a long line of the curious at the Nintendo booth, seemingly they have accomplished what they set out to do. But one has to wonder whether this line of journalists and insiders will translate to sales. No matter how simple or intuitive the controller, a non-gamer will not be enticed to purchase something they are not interested in to begin with. Sony rolled out the Playstation 3 with actual gameplay (will wonders never cease) and people were blown away....by the price of the system not the games. Sony, the kings of smoke and mirrors dazzled last year's E3 crowds with a dazzling display of CG wizardry that set themselves up to be underwhelming this year. Notably absent from the show floor was Killzone 2, Sony's biggest gun of last year, as most guessed that gun was loaded with blanks. But Sony did do something with their CG show from last year, they showed developers to look at they way they design the look of the games for the PS3, the game showcases had a decidedly different look than those that were developed for multiplatform distribution and in doing that they set themselves apart. Microsoft in the 2nd year for the 360 showed that they truly are not the 2nd coming of the Dreamcast. The Halo 3 trailer was truly one of the wow moments among me and all of my friends. Gears of War has us wearing bibs from the amount of drool it produced. But Microsoft who showed that they are not to be counted out has a problem that Sony does not, they seem to be the system for middle of the road ports, and while that will give them the bigger library for the moment they need to really push developers to make games that truly show what the 360 can do. I and other 360 owners are tired of seeing games that look slightly better than what is currently possible on the previous generation hardware. While it's true that gameplay matters most I expect next-gen graphics from my next-gen system. Well, that is how an E3 outsider sees the convention and the news that emanated from it.

V. Wilkins

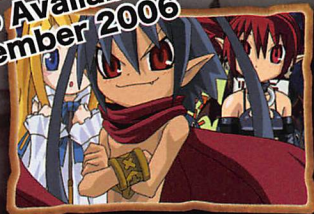


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by Etna

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PlayStation 2



A Wii Price to pay

Nintendo makes its move

Following its debut at E³, Nintendo unveiled its plans for Wii just days after the show. As forecasted, the price—of which there is only one for a change—under \$250.00 US (equivalent with the PSP bundle pack) including the unique freehand (Nun chuck) control makes it by far the most affordable next-generation console. With an official Japanese launch price of 25,000 Yen (roughly \$220), we could see the Wii launch for as low as \$199 in the US.. Nintendo expects to ship 6 million systems to retailers worldwide between its launch in the fourth quarter of 2006 and the end of its fiscal year on March 31, 2007, resulting in projections of 18 percent growth in sales globally, based on the continuing strong demand for the DS as well as the expected successful launch for Wii (safe bet there). Nintendo also expects to sell 17 million Wii games within the launch window. Sadly an exact date or list of launch titles has yet to be divulged, along with the unique “Virtual Console” aspect of Wii which will also be announced soon.

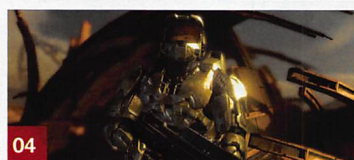


Sequels rule at E3

Some big names make their way home

Even though the new NIGHTS didn't make its long awaited debut (it's definitely in the works however) there were plenty of big surprises at this years show, namely Fable 2 (set 500 years after the original game), Atari's all new PSP Earthworm Jim (see page 47), and biggest of all, a new Golden Axe—finally!! And this is no fighting game. The game stars everyone's favorite goddess of fire Tyriss Flare (01) and is an action/RPG combining various forms of combat and beast riding akin with the original only *extremely* evolved. Under the watchful eye of Sega's recently purchased development team, Secret Level, Golden Axe is due out for PS3 and Xbox 360 sometime in 2007. No word yet on whether Gilius Thunderhead and Ax Battler will join the fray or if Death Adder is the main nemesis. Other unexpected sequels included Tokobot Plus for PS2 (02), an all new and vastly improved new Turok (03) being developed by BVG's Propaganda games (the game was playable, looked stunning and introduces a dark gritty new

sci-fi storyline), Halo 3 (04), a pair of new Death Jr.'s, and of course Super Mario Galaxy for Wii, Super Paper Mario for GC, and Yoshi's Island 2 for DS (05). So we didn't get our Battletoads...Nevertheless this was the best E3s for resurgences since it moved to the demilitarized zone.



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Kingdom Hearts II

Square Enix/PS2

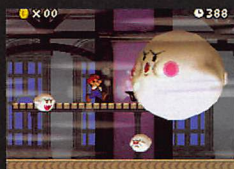
It's about time we saw another Square Enix game top the charts. All is well.



New Super Mario Bros.

Nintendo/NDS

The first original Mario action game since Super Mario 64. Truly an event for NDS fans.



GTA: Liberty City Stories

Rockstar / PSP

They could put it on Gizmondo and it would sell.



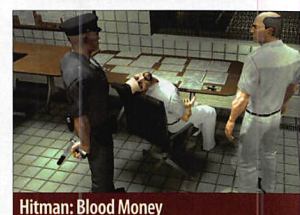
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Kingdom Hearts II Square Enix / PS2
02	Rockstar Games Table Tennis Rockstar / Xbox 360
03	Hitman: Bloodmoney Eidos / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360
04	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
05	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter Ubisoft / Xbox 360
06	GTA Liberty City Stories Rockstar / PS2
07	Final Fantasy XI Square Enix / PS2, Xbox 360
08	Metal Gear 3 Subsistence Konami / PS2
09	X-Men Activision / PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360
10	Painkiller Hell Wars Dreamcatcher/ Xbox



NPD Group Top Ten April Game Sales

01	Kingdom Hearts II Square Enix / PS2
02	Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter Ubisoft / Xbox 360
03	Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Take 2 / Xbox 360
04	The Godfather EA/PS2, Xbox, PC
05	God of War SCEA/ PS2
06	MLB '06: The Show SCEA / PS2
07	Major League Baseball 2K6 2K Games/ Xbox 360
08	Major League Baseball 2K6 2K Games/ PS2
09	Tourist Trophy: The Real Riding Simulator SCEA / PS2
10	Battlefield 2: Modern Combat EA/Xbox 360



Play Editor Picks



Dave Halverson

01	Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom SOE / PS3
02	Chromehounds Sega / Xbox 360
03	Ultimate Ghosts'n'Goblins Capcom / PSP
04	Sonic Riders Sega / GC
05	Moto GP 2006 THQ / Xbox 360



Brady Fiechter

01	Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion 2K / Xbox 360
02	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
03	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
04	Condemned Sega / Xbox 360
05	Tetris DS Nintendo / NDS



Greg Orlando

01	Rockstar Games Table Tennis Rockstar / Xbox 360
02	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
03	Chromehounds Sega / Xbox 360
04	Urban Chaos Eidos/ Xbox
05	Jaws Unleashed Majesco / Xbox



Casey Loe

01	Okami Capcom / PS2
02	Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion 2K / Xbox 360
03	Final Fantasy XII Square Enix / PS2
04	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
05	Yggdra Union Atlus / GBA



Mike Griffin

01	Guild Wars Factions NC Soft / PC
02	LocoRoco SCEA / PSP
03	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter Ubisoft / Xbox 360
04	Vanguard SOE / PC
05	Hellgate: London Namco / PC

Nick DesBarres

01	Okami Capcom / PS2
02	Street Fighter Zero: Ftr Gen Capcom / PS2
03	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
04	DQ and FF in Itadaki St. Square Enix / PSP
05	Sylvan Tale Sega / Game Gear

Eric Patterson

01	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo / NDS
02	The King of Fighters Neowave SNK / Xbox
03	Field Commander SOE / PSP
04	Brain Training Nintendo / NDS
05	The Jet Coaster D3/PS2

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PlayStation 2

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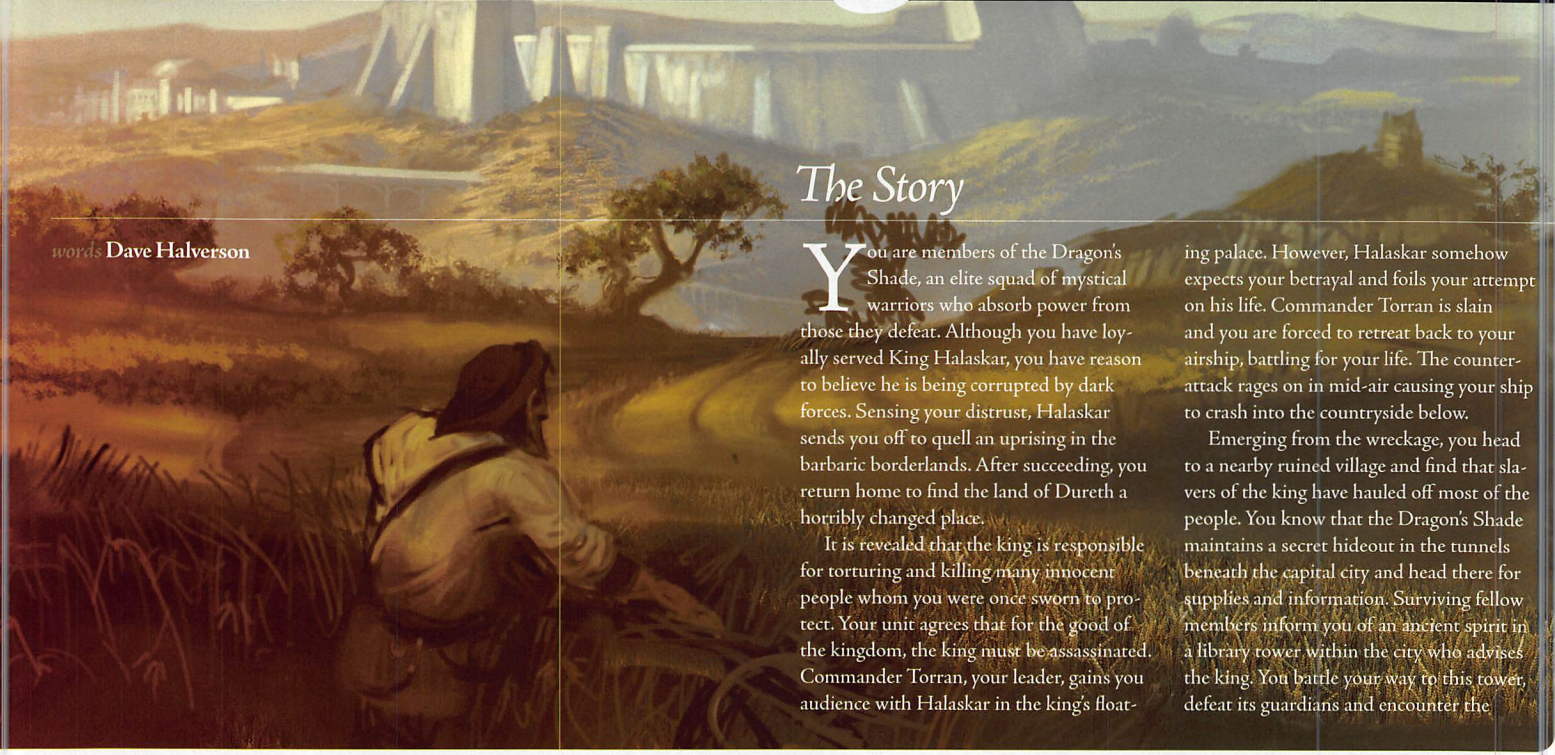
System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SOE
Developer	SOE	Available	November 17



Untold Legends Dark Kingdom

The PlayStation 3's first Untold Legend is born...

words Dave Halverson



The Story

You are members of the Dragon's Shade, an elite squad of mystical warriors who absorb power from those they defeat. Although you have loyally served King Halaskar, you have reason to believe he is being corrupted by dark forces. Sensing your distrust, Halaskar sends you off to quell an uprising in the barbaric borderlands. After succeeding, you return home to find the land of Dureth a horribly changed place.

It is revealed that the king is responsible for torturing and killing many innocent people whom you were once sworn to protect. Your unit agrees that for the good of the kingdom, the king must be assassinated. Commander Torran, your leader, gains you audience with Halaskar in the king's float-

ing palace. However, Halaskar somehow expects your betrayal and foils your attempt on his life. Commander Torran is slain and you are forced to retreat back to your airship, battling for your life. The counter-attack rages on in mid-air causing your ship to crash into the countryside below.

Emerging from the wreckage, you head to a nearby ruined village and find that slaves of the king have hauled off most of the people. You know that the Dragon's Shade maintains a secret hideout in the tunnels beneath the capital city and head there for supplies and information. Surviving fellow members inform you of an ancient spirit in a library tower within the city who advises the king. You battle your way to this tower, defeat its guardians and encounter the



Tower Elder. This ancient spirit reveals that it is bound to the Kingdom of Dureth but agrees to help you against the king. It tells you that the king is deriving his power from another dimension that thrives on the anguish of humans. It also provides you with teleportation gates directly to the conduits of pain and power created by the king.

After briefly returning to the hideout, you teleport to the first site of anguish, the Sunken Cathedral located in a flooded portion of the city. The king's sorcerers have animated the long drowned people to keep them in eternal pain. You battle your way there and destroy the abomination that funnels the power. Your second task is to head to the Cliffs of the Fallen and destroy that site of anguish. Next you take the steam tunnels to The Kiln, a terrifying place where the king had citizens burned alive to further fuel his power. After destroying this site, you return back to the hideout and find it a shambles. One of your companions turned out to be a traitor working with the king.

With Halaskar's forces hot on your heels, you race to the last great site of corruption, The Grinder; a gigantic machine that mixes unwilling slaves with blades and saws. Here you meet the Princess of Anguish, a creature from a vile dimension who taught the king how to channel raw pain into personal power. By defeating her, you destroy the king's final source of power. Unfortunately, doing so infuses you with the corruption; empowering you while slowly killing you. You race against time back to the floating fortress, wade through the remaining guards and kill Halaskar. With no heir, the Kingdom of Dureth falls into chaos and the tower elder is freed from his bonds, leaving you wondering if all of this was his plan from the beginning...

"Not only do the characters move naturally, but the Rigid Body System allows them to conform to every angle of the terrain."

Golan proudly ponders the state of SOE's new proprietary engine.

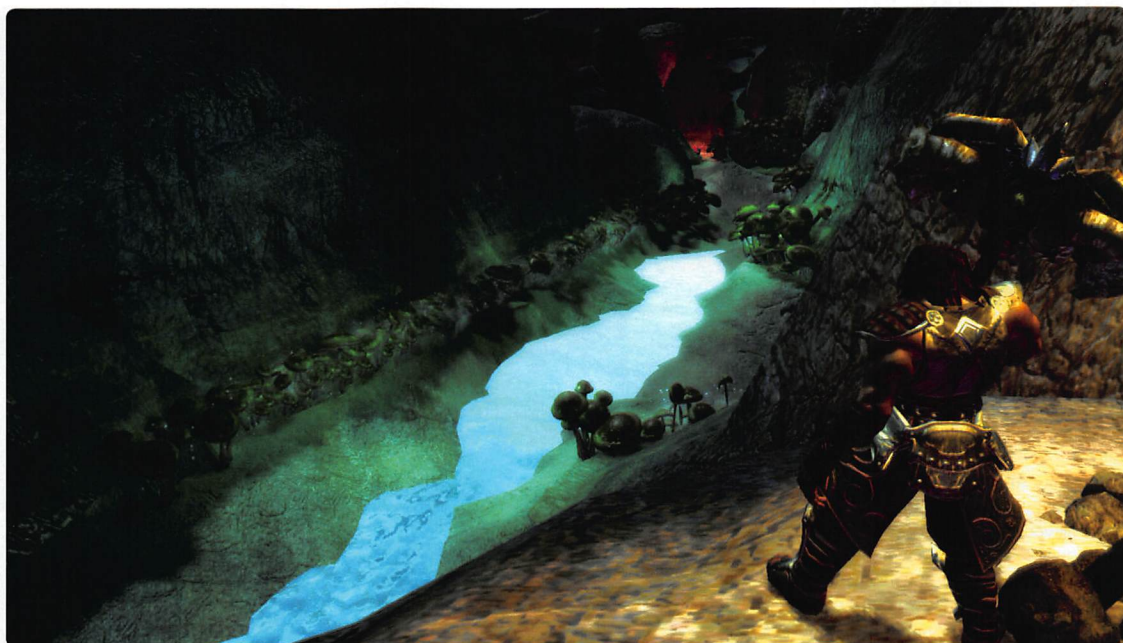
The Game

A brief interlude at a trade show or press conference is one thing, but sitting down and actually playing a PS3 game that's beginning to fire on all seven cylinders is quite another, especially when it's to unveil the Zala the Scout to the world, a nimble female warrior with animation from the gods. The three-and-half-hour traffic jam between the Play HQ and SOE's sunny San Diego offices was a small price to pay to get a firsthand look at what the PS3 and Dark Kingdom are really all about.

Post-E3, scads of premature arbitrators bum-rushed the scaffolding steps, black hoods drawn and noose in hand exclaiming the PS3 too expensive, underpow-

ered, and riddled with bird flu, fearing the wrath of the mass consumer and shaking their fists like Sony raised the price of gas, when we all know that every system Sony can produce will be swallowed up before they unload the trucks and that the system wars won't truly heat up until prices have come down.

As far as development is concerned, especially inside the launch window, the bigger concern at SOE isn't the PS3's price, or the race against Microsoft, it's the race against the clock. Fully aware of what they "could" do, the reality is what they must do, with a finite number of artists, designers, and programmers speeding towards an impending launch date. At some point the line must be drawn between visual payoff and making a great game. Producer Andy Sites elaborates: "Like lots of developers will soon realize, initially we had everything running off of the core processor but that's not how the system is set up to run. We needed to get out of the mindset of everything sitting under one CPU and distributing tasks among the 7 cell processors. How to multitask across those is what the challenge has been." Take normal-mapping for instance, one of the most prominent of the next-gen visual hooks. "It's a matter of time and resources vs. visual payoff" says Sites. "To normal-map everything and then take the time necessary to refine it down to get rid of that "plastic" look doesn't make sense. The time it would take to model everything in ultra-high detail isn't going to buy us a better looking game necessarily, or a better playing game. We want to be good looking but even more so we want Dark Kingdom to be fun, and a great game to play." From my vantage point, most of the environments utilized parallax mapping to such a degree that I presumed they were normal-mapped anyway and given the integrity of the of the landscape it's hard to imagine a better looking natural setting. As an example, one area where the cell processors



come into play, placing the game's flora, the results are dramatic. Running on the main CPU, the game contained 5-8000 pieces of flora being drawn in any given scene at, say, 25fps. Moving that task to a cell however, they can run 150,000 at double the fps and clip distance. There's absolutely no tradeoff for what makes the game look eminently better—it's essentially free. Dynamic geometry running off their own cells is what will set PS3 games apart in the future. Andy likens the main CPU to the conductor, with the 7 cells as the orchestra. They make some beautiful music.

The most effective use of normal-mapping (besides wonderfully ornate bits

"Zala's leather appears taut on her body and layered as if real, while the Golan warrior's layers of armor flex and contort with every swing of his mighty hammer..."

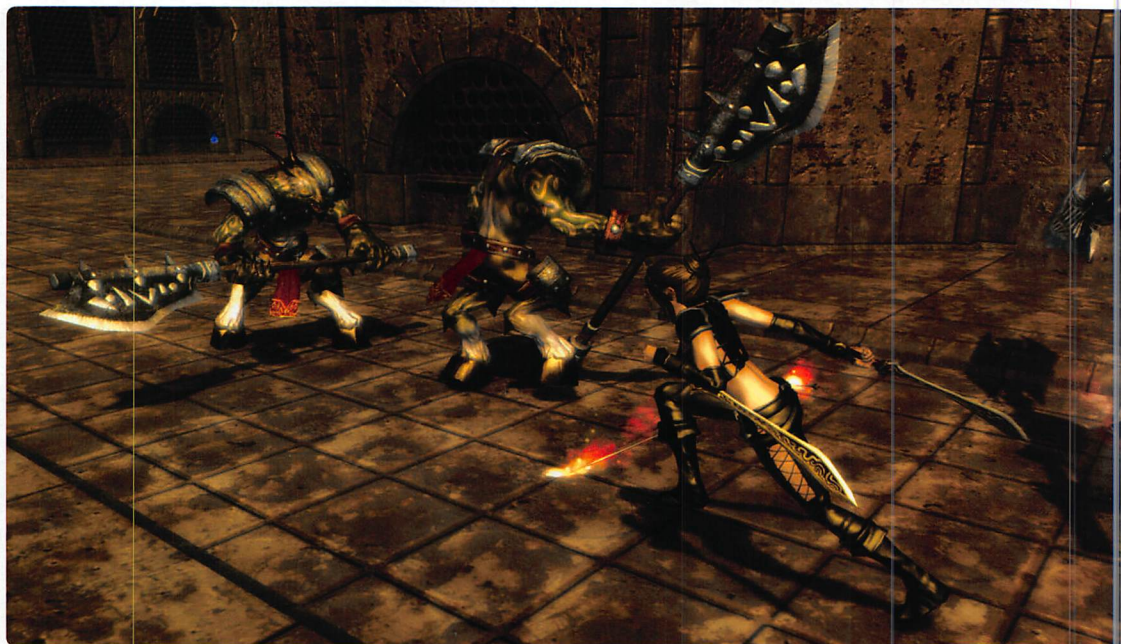
sprinkled within the palatial environs) is evidenced by a visit to the lair of Senior Artists Dante Fuget (who happened to be watching *Last Exile* while he worked—a man of impeccable taste) and Billy Ahlsweide, the game's senior character artists. Watching these guys wiz about Maya like Harry Potter with their wireless wands was a humbling experience. Here I experienced the beauty of normal-mapping first hand, as Billy took a 1-million-plus poly model he'd built a normal map for and then projected it onto a 3000-or-so poly version. ...You could barely tell the difference. Combined with the cloth physics and the way the layers of armor move in concert with the characters' bodies, these are the closest characters to their hand-drawn concepts that I have ever seen. And not just the three heroes: Every character in the game shares this integrity. *DK* features a stunning array of beasts that come to life like snarling little pets you could reach into the screen and let gnarl your furniture.

Gameplay-wise, the team isn't out to reinvent the wheel—even if they wanted to, they haven't the time—but they're certainly installing 22-inch rims and low-profile Pirellis for their first next-gen iteration. This is SOE-style, top-down action-adventure gaming at its very best—only refined.

The new HP/mana system bids farewell to accidental potion consumption, opting to fill your cup via the corresponding afterglow released from downed enemies, unless your meter's full, in which case it's converted to essence, the game's currency (and, therefore, your motivation to

fight smart). But don't look for merchants. Wee lads with rickety carts or gunnysacks wouldn't survive ten seconds in this harsh terrain, so instead you spend your earnings at save points, plucking goods and services from the ether, cashing in essence to imbue or buy new weapons and armor, all of which materializes in the real-time game world. You also obtain key items by defeating main bosses, but you'll have to cut through the mid-bosses first and neither is apt to go down easy. The bosses in *DK* are both strategic and resourceful. Of course, your character of choice can still pick up and stow his or her fill of endemic weapons and items for barter, bust open crates and barrels for

Zala in all of her enraged glory.



hidden HP and mana, and spend attribute points at level's end, but for the most part skilled fighting is the key to gaining the advantage over your opponents, more so than in previous Legends.

Another splendid new feature is the jump. DK is no platformer (don't I wish) but it is the first game in the series to feature and utilize great jumping animation. Aside from the odd jumping puzzle (they're currently debating over how many and how hard—I say bring it on), certain places in the game can be reached and used strategically by jumping, a component long missing in the series. Other moves include evasion, blocking, spell-casting, and some wicked three-hit combos, all of which look insanely beautiful due to the integrity of the main characters. Zala's leather chaps appears taut on her body and layered as if real, while Golan the warrior's layers of armor flex and contort with every swing of his mighty hammer.

Through the use of Havok and a completely proprietary 3D engine written by the programming team, visual strides have also been made in projecting a sense of realism, which affects the gameplay more than you might think. Not only do the characters move naturally, but the Rigid Body System allows them to conform to every angle of the terrain, as well as interact with, pick up, and throw various items or enemies with newfound precision. Water is unbelievable too, and wait until you

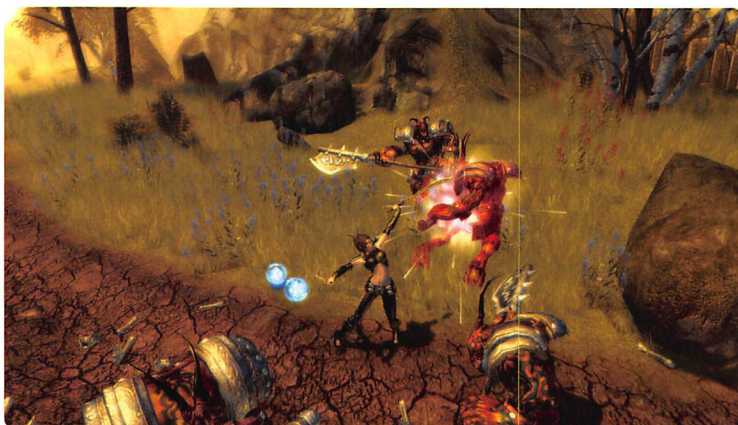
see what they're doing with marble floors. Yet another wish to check off of the list, a user-controlled camera has also been added, allowing the player to set the angle from third-person to a bird's-eye view on the fly in accord with each environment. Outdoors you can soak in every panorama, and when exploring caverns and keeps you can peer to the end of every corridor or scout from far overhead.

The modus operandi at SOE is design and code first (basically creating the sandbox or playground as Andy describes it) then start refining—luckily, I stepped in as the refinement stage was getting underway. The single-player story mode (for 1-4 players) is priority one, (they're shooting for 15-20 hours of gameplay—which for a game of this nature at launch is impressive to say the least) but there are a surprising number of online attractions too, such as arena-based free-for-alls and the promise of downloadable content after the game ships. About the only thing I didn't see (besides the mage) were the cut-scenes which will be handled in-engine with SOE's usual guile, only not within a town hub or tavern. DK is more trek—a journey moving ever-forward towards the dark Kingdom of Dureth. After my hands-on time with two nearly complete levels all I want for Christmas is my Scout and enough time on my hands to get intimately familiar with every inch of this splendid new and as yet Untold Legend.

“The time it would take to model everything in ultra-high detail isn't going to buy us a better looking game necessarily, or a better playing game.”

Andy Sites – Producer





Notice the detail in the skeletons armor... Soon to be scattered about the dungeon floor.



"Because of the way the cell chips operate, we're able to run systems on them that would never make it into a game like ours."

Brad White – Environmental Lead



The entire Untold Legends Team...Now back to work!

Interviews

Billy
Ahisewede



Senior Artist

You've worked on quite a few medieval games—how do you stay inspired and continually manage to create fresh beasts?

Anime, toys, art books, comics and movies are all great inspirations. We have some great concept artists on staff that make the modelers' jobs a lot easier.

How close would you say the final normal-mapped models are to your original super-high-poly-count renders?

In most cases you can't tell the difference. The PS3 has allowed us to create substantially higher polygon characters than the previous generation of hardware.

Aside from designing characters, do you also have a hand in their mannerisms? And if so, explain how you interact with the overall game flow objective.

The character team works closely with the animators to fix any problems the mesh might have while in movement and suggest possible additions. It's nice to see a creature that is designed well when animation gets a hold of it, they only have to look at it and know immediately how it should act and what it should do. I think a huge part of that goes back to the initial concept.

How long does it take to build each character that will appear in the game once the drawn concept is agreed upon?

It varies a lot between player characters and creatures. Each player character variation can take up to two weeks where as some of the creatures take only a few days.

Are visible seams a thing of the past? If so can you elaborate on how and why?

With the combination of increased poly-counts and through the use of normal-mapping, the visual seaming is going to be much less abundant in next-gen games.

How do the cell processors enhance what you personally are able to achieve with your characters?

Since the cell processors enable the developers to distribute many of the processor-intensive tasks, it allows us to focus the level of detail on things like animations, cloth simulation (clothing and hair), particles, etc. By increasing the level of detail in these areas, it allows us to make much more visually-fantastic characters and creatures.

Brad
White



Environment Lead

How have the cell processors changed or enhanced your ability to create detailed environments?

Although my team and I don't interact with components like the cell processors, it does affect us. Because of the way the cell chips operate, we're able to run systems on them that would never make it into a game like ours. The main processor and GPU can crank out the detailed environment we construct, while systems like physics, water, etc., don't have as much of a performance impact as they would on a machine like a PC. We've been able to throw crazy amounts of vertex data at the PS3 with really great results.

You described the architecture as Byzantine; can you elaborate on the period?

We used Byzantine architectural images as inspiration for the look of various parts of the kingdom. It's the style of architecture that can be found in old cities like Istanbul. Although we're not following it exactly, it's a look that is great to draw from because the style can feel "fantasy" but at the same time believable.

What can players expect from reflective surfaces such as marble and water?

We've got a great water simulation written by Paul Balon. It allows for many different types of surfaces as well as behavior, such as being affected by characters or projectiles. For the reflective aspects of such surfaces like marble or water, we're using a few methods to add realism to the look. We're currently trying a few things out technically to see what gives us the best performance with the best visual quality.

Do you utilize the same techniques in building environs as the character designers do creating the characters, where you build a highly complex area, create the normal map, and then lay it over a lower-resolution model?

Some of the levels in production do use this technique, but we have different needs to deal with than the character team, and don't get to use high-res mod-



els for everything (because we'd never finish the game). It is a fantastic way to build really nice low-poly models, but the environments require a faster turnaround than that process would allow us.

You also spoke of platforming areas/puzzles within the game. Is there a fair amount?

I can only speak for environments, but we're trying to make sure that we leverage the physics engine as much as we can in the gameplay. For my team, that means knowing what the designers are thinking of in terms of gameplay, and then facilitating those gameplay elements through the construction of the environments. One example of this would be for us to make sure that the pillars in an ancient temple are breakable, and will respond well to the physics engine. We're looking for any way possible to use this feature to allow unexpected events to occur during the game. And we will have a nice amount of platform-style gameplay, enough to be fun, but not so much that it kills the momentum of the level.

What about tiered environments and topography. Does DK feature more varied terrain?

We really wanted to send the players through as many varied environments as possible, and we do have a nice, wide range of environments to throw at the player. This is all dependent on how soon we have to ship, of course. We're building the levels using a tile-based methodology where the levels are built using components of halls and rooms. This allows us to have quick turnaround on changes that are requested by design or required by performance, such as widening a hall or altering the shape of a room. That is not to say that the level generation is automated in some way. All DK's levels are hand-built by the artists, rather than having some tool do the work for us.

In the outdoor areas, will flora pop or draw in at all? Are those caveats a thing of the past?

Those are probably not entirely things of the past, but we've got flora working very smoothly in our engine. The flora does fade in at a certain distance, but because this distance is pretty far, it's fairly difficult to tell where the flora begins and ends. Issues like this are really dependent on the tools the coders are able to provide the artists. In our case, we have great systems for things like flora, water, physics, etc., that are allowing the team to make incredibly compelling environments for Dark Kingdom. I look forward to the release and reading the feedback of our players.

"Because of the way the cell chips operate, we're able to run systems on them that would never make it into a game like ours."

Brad White -Environmental Lead



The initial Brute design was ditched for a more cohesive look. Meet Golan.

Fun with trees with...

Billy
Yates



Senior Designer

Amazed by Dark Kingdom's trees, I asked Billy Yates the secret to constructing trees that don't resemble bunches of limb- and leaf-colored cards. Aside from taking longer (the first tree took two days to build) Billy explained "we used very typically what most people do—flat cards. The secret is, since the camera is variable, that you never want to see a flat edge. So it's sort of like a weeping wil-

low. There are still panes – you just drape everything as if you had cloth. The great thing about the PS3 hardware is that you can throw so many triangles at it at once. You're not constantly managing like you

did on PS2—on PS3 you make it so it looks right and then start to worry about its cost effect.



A great place to kick
back...and hack
monsters to pieces.



Things blow up real good on PS3.



"Outdoors you can soak in every panorama, and when exploring caverns and keeps you can peer to the end of every corridor or scout from far overhead."

Anatomy of a Senior Creative Director

Ever wonder what these guys do?
Wonder no more...

by Rich
Waters



At the beginning of a project, I work with the Producer and team leads to figure out the scope of the project —how much time and resources we have available, how big of a game can we make, and what the core concepts for the game are. After that, I get together with the game design team to establish the story and setting, plan out the flow and pace of the game, and refine the game play concepts so that they start as great ideas and end up as well-implemented fun.

Once we've got a good foundation for the game design, I'll spend time with the Art and Code leads to keep the game heading in the right direction —design needs to give a solid definition of what settings and characters we'll need and then collaborate with art to bring beautiful and functional assets into the game. We'll also spend a lot of time with code learning what tools and support they can give us, providing them with information about how the tools, AI, or game systems should work, and integrating the excellent features they give us into actual game play.

In the end, projects of this size are always about teamwork and my job is fairly similar to the other leads on the team—coordinate with art and code to make sure we're doing whatever we can to facilitate their work, check the schedule frequently to make sure the big picture is on track, and help the design team to make the best game we can in the time available. play

E3

Six-hundred dollar hardware. Partially naked booth babes. A whole lot of Wii. Fan-boy central. Opinions that are formed by mostly nonsense. Press conferences that go on and on. Lots of noise and headaches and parties to make it all feel better. Lots of games that you'll never want to play. Lots of great games that will blow you away. Not enough surprises. Sequel after sequel. War and gun metal and first-person shooters. Welcome to E3 2006.

selections **play** magazine staff

photos Michael Tran



20

Los Angeles Convention Center
May 10-12

wii game of the show

Super Mario Galaxy

WINNER

Nintendo/Wii



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

#2

Nintendo/Wii

Sonic Wildfire

#3

Sega/Wii

playstation 3 game of the show

Assassin's Creed

WINNER

Ubisoft/PS3



Heavenly Sword

#2

SCEJ/PS3

Resistance: Rise of Man

#3

SCEA/PS3

xbox 360 game of the show

Mass Effect

WINNER

Microsoft/Xbox 360



Gears of War

#2

Microsoft/Xbox 360

Dead Rising

#3

Capcom/Xbox 360

gamecube game of the show

The Legend of Zelda: TP

WINNER

Nintendo/GameCube

Super Paper Mario

#2

Nintendo/GameCube



Baiten Kaitos Origins

#3

Namco/GameCube

playstation 2 game of the show

Okami

WINNER

Capcom/PS2



God of War 2

#2

SCEA/PS2

Final Fantasy XII

#3

Square Enix/PS2

xbox game of the show

Justice League Heroes

WINNER

Warner Bros. Int./Xbox



Lego Star Wars II

#2

LucasArts/Xbox

Thrillville

#3

LucasArts/Xbox



nintendo ds game of the show

Castlevania PoR

WINNER

Konami/NDS



Final Fantasy III

#2

Square Enix/NDS

Zelda Phantom Hourglass

#3

Nintendo/NDS

psp game of the show

Ult. Ghosts 'n Goblins

WINNER

Capcom/PSP



MGS Portable Ops

#2

Konami/PSP

Death Jr. The Root of Evil

#3

Konami/PSP

pc game of the show

Spore

WINNER

EA/PC



Crysis

#2

EA/PC

Huxley

#3

Webzen/PC

non-playable game of the show

Final Fantasy XIII

WINNER

Square Enix/PS3



Golden Axe

#2

Sega/PS3, Xbox 360

Metal Gear Solid 4

#3

Konami/PS3

overall game of the show

Bioshock

WINNER

2K Games/Xbox 360



Super Mario Galaxy

#2

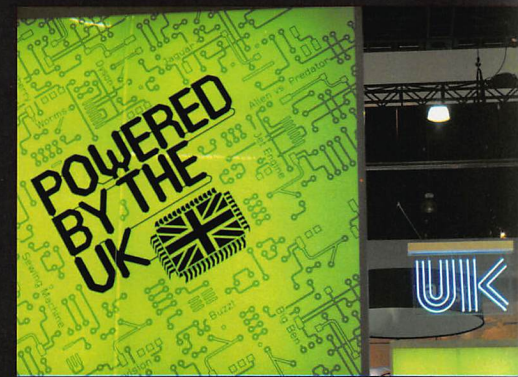
Nintendo/Wii

Gears of War

#3

Microsoft/Xbox 360





individual awards

action

Gears of War

WINNER

Microsoft / Xbox 360



Okami

#2

Capcom / PS2

God of War 2

#3

SCEA / PS2

fps

Bioshock

WINNER

2K Games / Xbox 360



Darkness

#2

2K Games / Xbox 360, PS3

Crysis

#3

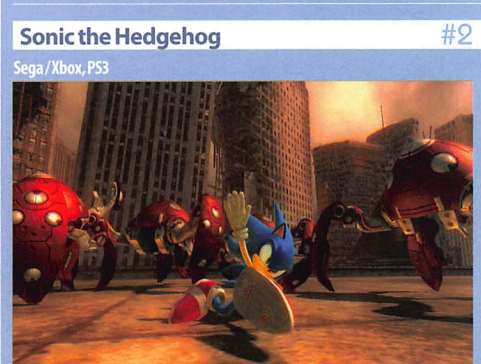
EA / PC

character action

Super Mario Galaxy

WINNER

Nintendo / Wii



Sonic the Hedgehog

#2

Sega / Xbox, PS3

Arthur and the Minimoys

#3

Atari / PS2, PC

fighting

Virtua Fighter 5

WINNER

Sega / PS3



Smash Bros. Brawl

#2

Nintendo / Wii

One Piece Grand Adventure

#3

Bandai Namco / PS2

open world

Crackdown

WINNER

Microsoft / Xbox 360



Yakuza

#2

Sega / PS2

Mercenaries 2

#3

LucasArts / PS3

rpg

Mass Effect

WINNER

Microsoft / Xbox 360



Final Fantasy XII

#2

Square Enix / PS2

Blue Dragon

#3

Microsoft / Xbox 360

movie-based

Indiana Jones 2007

WINNER

LucasArts / PS3



Eragon

#2

VU Games / Xbox 360, PS2

Arthur and the Minimoys

#3

Atari / PS2, PC

mmo

Huxley

WINNER

Webzen / PC



Age of Conan

#2

Funcom / PC

Tabula Rasa

#3

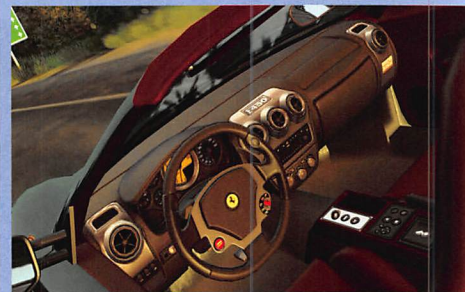
NCsoft / PC

racing

Test Drive Unlimited

WINNER

Atari / Xbox 360



Excite Truck

#2

Nintendo / Wii

IGPX

#3

Bandai Namco / PS2

tv-based

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja

WINNER

Bandai Namco / PS2



One Piece: Grand Adventure

#2

Bandai Namco / PS2

The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy

#3

Midway / PS2

survival horror

Dead Rising

WINNER

Capcom / Xbox 360



Alone in the Dark

#2

Atari / Xbox 360, PS3

Silent Hill Origins

#3

Konami / PSP

shooting

Warhawk

WINNER

SCEA / PS3



Metal Slug Collection

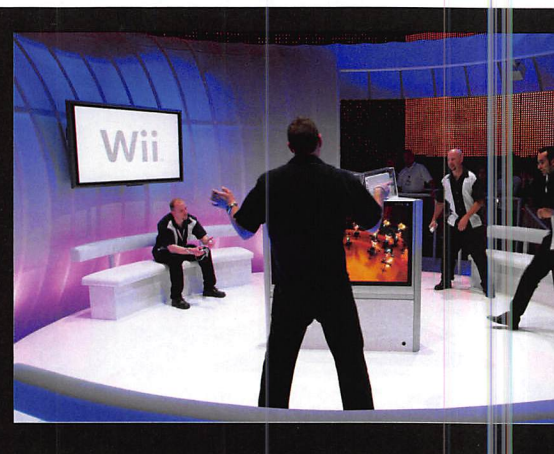
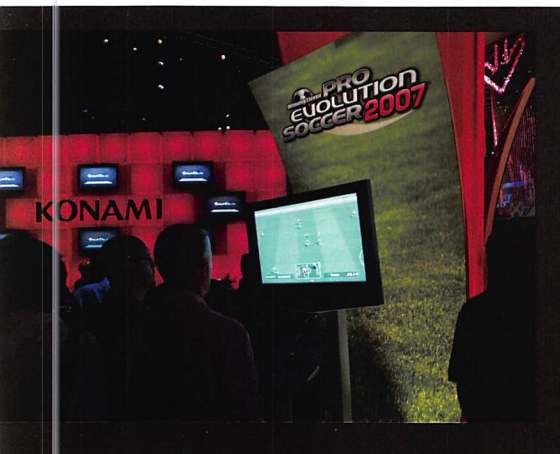
#2

SNK / Wii

Starfox Command

#3

Nintendo / NDS



strategy

Maelstrom**WINNER**

Codemasters/PC

**LOTR Battle for Middle Earth II**

#2

EA/PC, Xbox 360

Warhammer Mark of Chaos

#3

Namco Bandai/PC

simulation

Spore**WINNER**

EA/PC

Brooktown High: Senior Year

#2

Konami/NDS

Viva Piñata

#3

Microsoft/Xbox 360



biggest surprise

Golden Axe**WINNER**

Sega/Xbox 360, PS3

**Fable 2**

#2

Microsoft/Xbox 360

Super Mario Galaxy

#3

Nintendo/Wii

alternative

Viva Pinata**WINNER**

Microsoft/Xbox 360

Eye of Judgement

#2

SCEA/PS3

Loco Roco

#3

SCEA/PSP



sports

Wii Sports**WINNER**

Nintendo/Wii

**Super Swing Golf Pangya**

#2

Tecmo/Wii

Virtua Tennis 3

#3

Sega/Xbox 360

no-shows

Motor Storm

Killzone

Resident Evil 5

Devil May Cry 4

Nights on Wii (rumor)

Duke Nukem Forever

biggest disappointment

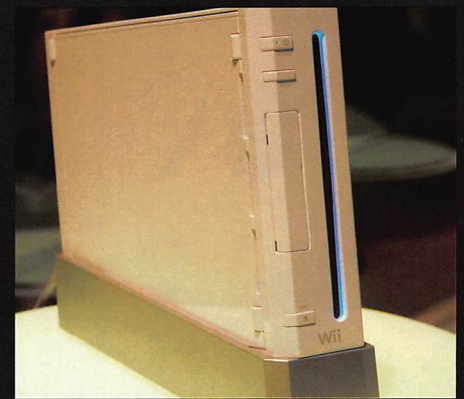
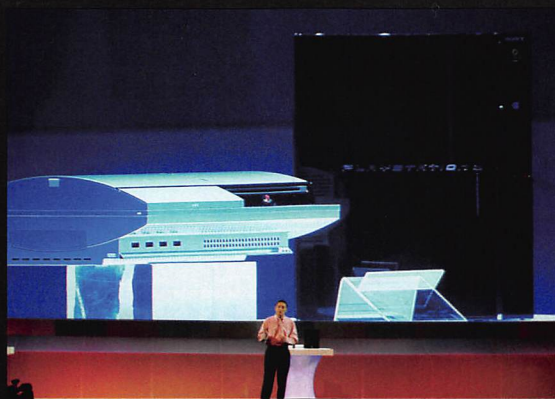
PS3 price**LOSER**

Dave and Brady beg to differ: Screw the majority!

Overabundance of FPS games

#2

There are too damn many of them!



staff top 10



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	Heavenly Sword SCEA / PS3
02	Super Mario Galaxy Nintendo / Wii
03	BioShock 2K Games / Xbox 360, PS3
04	The Darkness 2K Games / Xbox, PS3
05	Sonic the Hedgehog Sega / Xbox 360, PS3
06	Mass Effect Microsoft / Xbox 360
07	Gears of War Microsoft / Xbox 360
08	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin Konami / NDS
09	Arthur and the Minimoys Atari / PS2, PC
10	Lunar Knights Konami / NDS

staff top 10



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	BioShock 2K Games / Xbox 360, PS3
02	The Darkness 2K Games / Xbox 360, PS3
03	Assassin's Creed Ubisoft / PS3
04	Super Mario Galaxy Nintendo / Wii
05	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
06	Resistance: Fall of Man SCEA / PS3
07	Mass Effect Microsoft / Xbox 360
08	Haze Ubisoft / PS3
09	Okami Capcom / PS2
10	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin Konami / NDS

staff top 10



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
02	Phantasy Star Universe Sega / PS2, Xbox 360, PC
03	Final Fantasy XII Square-Enix / PS2
04	Loco Roco SCEA / PSP
05	Ultimate Ghouls N' Ghosts Capcom / PSP
06	Elite Beat Agents Nintendo / NDS
07	Persona 3 Atlus / PS2
08	Audition Yedang Online / PC
09	Touch Detective Atlus / NDS
10	Hot PXL Atari / PSP

staff top 10



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
02	Assassin's Creed Ubisoft / PS3
03	Super Mario Galaxy Nintendo / Wii
04	Okami Capcom / PS2
05	Gears of War Microsoft / Xbox 360
06	Rainbow Six: Las Vegas Ubisoft / Xbox 360
07	Splinter Cell: Double Agent Ubisoft / Xbox 360
08	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess Nintendo / Wii, Gamecube
09	Final Fantasy III Square-Enix / NDS
10	Mass Effect Microsoft / Xbox 360

staff top 10



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

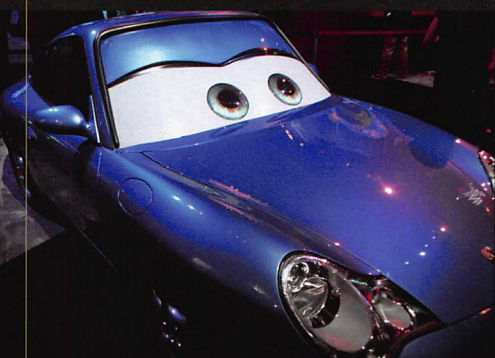
	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	Mass Effect Microsoft / Xbox 360
02	Bioshock 2k Games / Xbox 360, PS3
03	Spore EA / PC
04	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
05	Gears of Wars Microsoft / Xbox 360
06	Assassin's Creed Ubisoft / PS3
07	Resistance: Fall of Man SCEA / PS3
08	Super Mario Galaxy Nintendo / Wii
09	Loco Roco SCEA / PSP
10	Mercenaries 2: World in Flames Lucasarts / PS3

staff top 10



Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

	Personal Top 10: E3 2006
01	Okami Capcom / PS2
02	Dead Rising Capcom / Xbox 360
03	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess Nintendo / Wii, Gamecube
04	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin Konami / NDS
05	Super Mario Galaxy Nintendo / Wii
06	Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria Square-Enix / PS2
07	Final Fantasy III Square-Enix / NDS
08	Loco Roco SCEA / PSP
09	Lost Planet Capcom / Xbox 360
10	Sonic the Hedgehog Sega / PS3, Xbox 360





The Darkness

Evil is oh so good

words Brady Fletcher

"As mafia hitman Jackie Estacado, death is an afterthought."

Why use guns when you've got the darkness on your side.



The Darkness, I believe, is the first game to showcase death by jack hammer. Or more to the point, death in which a creature known as a Darkling, an unlikely ally of sorts, gleefully prances around by your side, picking up a jack hammer to tear through the gut of a helpless police officer screaming on the ground. In one instance, a particular Darkling is shown to possess a rather large saw in place of an arm, but the actual use for this cumbersome appendage is still up to the imagination.

Before we get to these and many more scenes of violence, before the NYPD dramatically crash their van through a brick wall and storm the building you're occupying, the "you" in this story is shown casually tossing a body bag into the back of a van. As mafia hitman Jackie Estacado, death is an afterthought. So messed up is this ruthless contract killer that he ends up possessed with the powers of the Darkness—some supernatural super juice that allows him to feed off the evil that lurks in the shadows. He doesn't take too well to his new form, turning on his family, his acquaintances and, eventually, the Darkness that's working to control him.

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Starbreeze	Available	2007



The idea for the game comes from *The Darkness* comic book, brought to virtual form through the talent behind *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*. As a first-person shooter, the action was fierce and unrelenting as seen in the level on display, but word is the game isn't all run-and-gun—and goes places you won't be expecting. For those moments of raw violence, the interesting twist of drawing power from the darkness takes on several dimensions. Shooting out a light source can create a scene of deep shadows—an awesome visual effect for starters—inviting you to step into a zone

of possession. The results will change and grow in strength as Jackie develops his character and comes to grips with his abilities. Along with summoning the Darklings, direct transformational powers come into play, like the slithery tentacles that extend out to use as gruesome weapons and a means to toss around giant environmental objects—another cool technical feat that shows off a powerful physics engine. In another great scene, you can call on a power that opens up a mini black hole, devouring anything in its immediate path. **play**



System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Irrational Games	Available	2007

Bioshock

A powerful jolt to the system

words Brady Fiechter

I speak for many when I say there was no game at E3 2006 that left a greater impact than Bioshock. I saw no game this original in its concept. No game existing with such inspired invention and mood. Nothing so boldly imaginative and visually captivating. I loved every single part of this... 15 minute demo.

So yeah, E3 is an awful barometer for sensible prognosticating, inspiring fanboy knee-jerk reactions around every overstuffed corner. For now, call me the Bioshock fanboy.

It's the core idea of Bioshock that finally works me up. A secret society of isolationists led to their own destruction; the misguided search for purpose; an underwater world, once a perceived utopia, now a claustrophobic grave where beauty swims amongst the dead and decaying.

The world is introduced as a hidden place, somewhere out in the distant depths of the ocean. The nameless, faceless protagonist in Bioshock is guided there on blind luck. His plane goes down, and the only hope for survival is the strange lighthouse beacon piercing the stormy night sky.

Bioshock is part adventure, part action game, part personal discovery. You have the freedom to approach tasks in more ways than one, fashion makeshift weapons and grow your character. While there will likely be some focused conflict to the story, the game seems more about involving yourself in the machinations of the characters and facing your own reactions to this disturbing place known as Rapture. Bioshock's creators are going for a world that happens around you as much as to you. Studying it,

Looks too good to destroy...



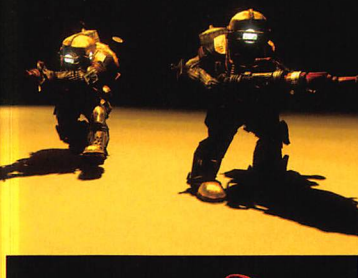


becoming a part of it for primal survival, is a driving theme.

Some characters don't even care who you are, going about their creepy business for various reasons. Rapture was built on the hope of genetic breakthroughs within its experimental community, which accounts for the bizarre malformations of the life that remains. Dominating the demo was a character called Big Daddy, who lumbered around in an old deep-sea diving suit as he dutifully escorted a playful little girl through the corpse-ridden setting. Her job: violently ram a giant needle into the gut of a body, extracting their Adam—the bioengineered material that has become the scourge of this fractured society.

This is not a first-person shooter. Ammunition hardly exists, and you're not going to be locked into sprawling action sequences. Using your noggin is a part of the progression; study the environment, study the enemy and make them do the hard and dangerous work for you. Fear is as much the enemy, the unknown is a narrative component. Look deeper, and you see a reflection of purity and suffocation in the watery setting, a world as intriguing as it is terrifying. This is one of the very few games at E3 that truly captured me. **play**

The murky lighting adds to the claustrophobia.



"Her job: violently ram a giant needle into the gut of a body, extracting their Adam."

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sega Studios Japan	Available	Fall 2006

Sonic the Hedgehog

What can he say? He loves rings



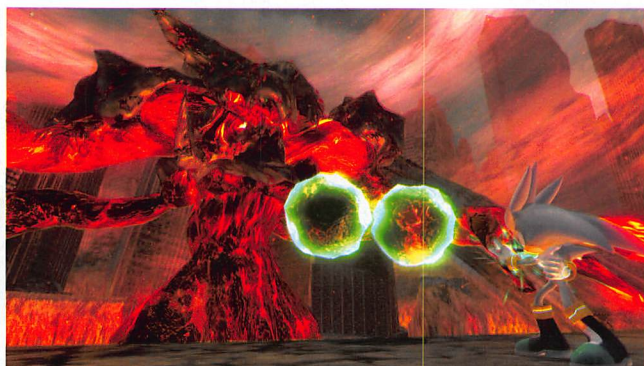
words Dave Halverson

I came away from last year's E3 mouth agape, completely floored by the next-gen Sonic demo, and so of course I entered this one with sky-high hopes that the game would live up to my lofty expectations. Weary of yet another been-there, spun-that, high-speed-auto-pilot-mad-dash (that would be Sonic Wii) and still reeling from Shadow's abysmal debut, I knew the game would look great, but whether or not it offered Sonic fans anything new would ultimately determine whether 15 years has been too many, or too few. I'm happy to report that post-Naka Sonic (he has little input on the project which may prove a blessing) still has a full tank of super-unleaded, and we all know how valuable that is. This is a re-invention of sorts—a return to what Sonic Adventure started. The game takes place in the water kingdom of Soleanna, where Elise, the princess Sonic met in his first adventure in the human world, has been kidnapped by Dr. Eggman, who is naturally

bent on destroying her kingdom for his own sinister reasons. Yes, it's a save-the-princess story, but one with many twists and turns, massive open-world town stages, and a huge cast of characters including endemic pathways for Sonic's new kinetically charged rival Silver, and Shadow, making multiple passes absolutely requisite.

As far as new tech goes, light blooms and motion blurs abound, along with by far the most lush environments Sonic Team have ever produced and physics and animation that take Sonic-style gameplay to an entirely new level. The game still requires that Sonic-sixth-sense that fans have come to know and either love or loathe, including zero edge collision (you fall—you die), but it's got that fantastic contraption level design going on as well as the Sonic Adventure-style town areas and sub-missions (only sans blocky, ancillary characters and toy cars). **play**

Silver's balls will surely cool this behemoth's jets.



"The game still requires that Sonic-sixth-sense that fans have come to know and either love or loathe..."



Indiana Jones

You call him Dr. Jones!

words Greg Orlando

Much can be learned from Dr. Indiana Jones, who was named after a dog and who, in the pursuit of classical archaeology, routinely punched Nazis in their stupid monkey faces.

Now the movie hero Jones (you may remember him from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*) is leaping into his newest adventure, this time on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

To ensure his triumphant return LucasArts has planned something very, very special for Jones. The game's title hasn't been finalized yet, but its innards have, and two new technologies will be powering its play. These innovations are being called euphoria and digital molecular matter (DMM), and LucasArts has been heralding them as nothing short of revolutionary.

Euphoria, in essence, creates a central nervous system for the game's characters. This means that both Jones and the suckers he lumps up will react to stimuli in a way never-before-seen in games. Free from traditional animated behaviors, the characters in the game are able to move and interact with their world realistically,

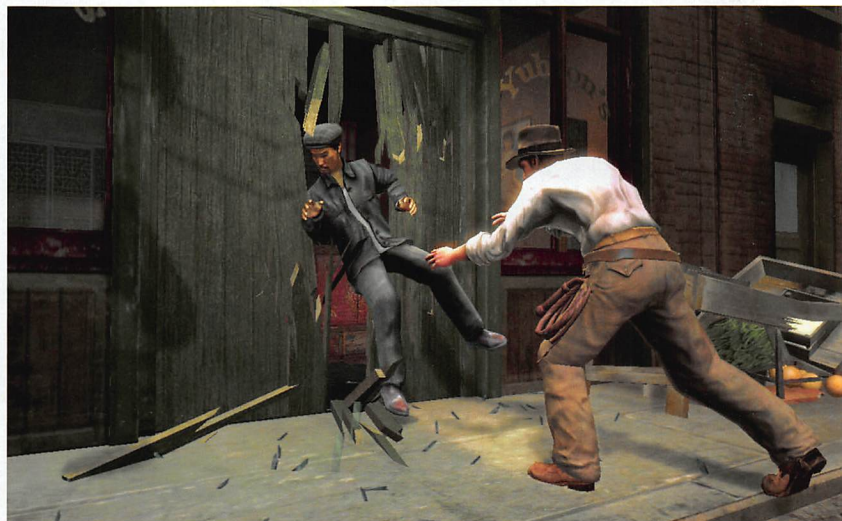
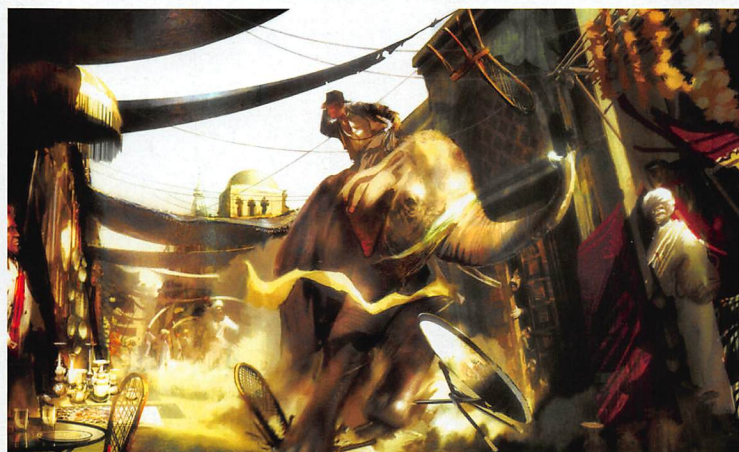
"To ensure his triumphant return LucasArts has planned something very, very special for Jones."

stumbling and trying to right themselves, rolling over oddly shaped obstacles such as car bumpers, and trying to grab at ledges when they're falling. LucasArts showed off Euphoria by showing how a thug, hurled at a car five times in a row, never once reacted in the exact same way.

With DMM, wood splinters when it's hit. Plaster walls crumble when a goon bounces off them. Glass will shatter realistically. It's the ultimate in real-world environmental physics, and perfectly complements the realistic movements and actions of the euphoria-imbued characters in Jones. Together, the two technologies set the stage for what promises to be a whopper of a Nazi-pummeling adventure.

Not much is known about Jones' plot, but two scenes from the game were shown at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo. In one, Jones was racing down

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Publisher	LucasArts
Developer	LucasArts	Available	2007



San Francisco's California Street atop a runaway cable car. While the conductor attempted to yank the brakes and stop the car's progress, enemies tried their darndest to storm the vehicle and kill Jones. Some of the villains made their leaps, crashing through the car's glass panels and pulling themselves up onto its roof. Others, sadly, failed in their efforts and missed, falling on the concrete to be run over by the very automobiles they'd leapt from in their pursuit of the cable car.

The other scene featured a more traditional brawl, and highlighted the game's interactive environments. Jones punched foes through boarded-up storefronts, knocked them into the aforementioned car and, for the grand finale, caused a huge neon sign to collapse and fall, taking with it a series of enemies perched on nearby fire escapes. It was, in fact, video euphoria, and foretold of great things for LucasArts' beloved archaeologist. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 3 and...?	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	Available	2007

Assassin's Creed

Silent and deadly

words Casey Loe

When William V de Montferrat was born in 1115 A.D., he probably had no idea of the significant role he'd play in history. Oh, I'm sure he figured he'd be some kick-ass marquess, fighting for Rome in the Second and Third Crusades and ably ruling the lands he conquered. But it probably never occurred to him that nine centuries later, 60,000 video game nerds would watch him get repeatedly assassinated on the E3 show floor and think to themselves, "goddamn it, I might have to buy a PS3 for that."

In a sea of sadly generic PS3 demos, Assassin's Creed stood out as both the most visually impressive and conceptually interesting game on the platform. Not only do its environments offer a nearly unprecedented level of detail and activity, but Ubisoft Montreal have managed the rare feat of delivering next-generation gameplay alongside their next-generation visuals.

You play as Altair, an assassin who does as he's told, killing occupiers and rebels alike in the aftermath of the Third Crusade. The aforementioned William V de Montferrat (an actual historical figure) was the target in the demo, and to reach him Altair had to hop onto his horse and ride to Acre, one of the three major cities in the game. The world of Assassin's Creed has been built to accurately reflect history, and Acre looks and feels like a living, breathing city, not merely a stage that has been designed to facilitate your mission.

It's fun to pull a Spiderman and climb to the rooftops, but the game truly shines when you're battling the crowds of shabbily dressed peasants at street level. To keep a low profile you can walk among them, maneuvering slowpokes aside with a gentle touch. If you're in a hurry, you can push and shove to move quickly, but you may provoke fistfights that draw unwanted attention. If the situation is desperate, there's a way to disperse the crowd



"...the game truly shines when you're battling the crowds of shabbily dressed peasants at street level."

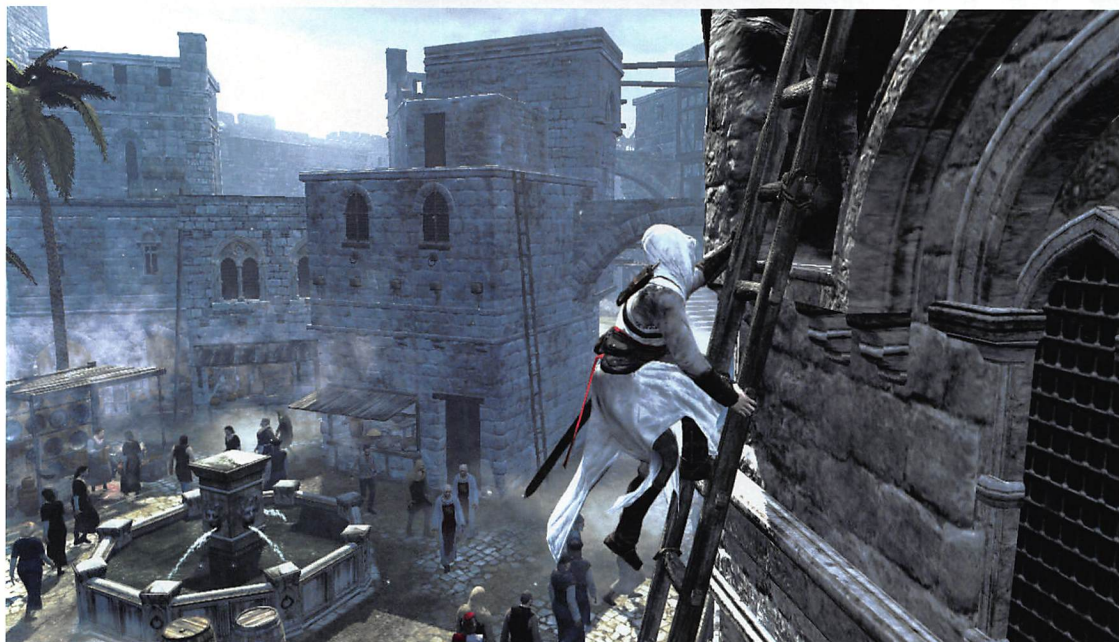
completely—draw your blade and gut someone. Such tactics may be satisfying, but if you avoid making waves you can use the teeming peasants as an asset, blending into the crowd to sneak up on a target or evade pursuers.

In the demo, it took a complicated chain of events to reach Willy V's position, and the developers assure us it was only one of a number of possible methods. While exploring the city, Altair stumbled upon a woman being attacked by rapacious guardsmen. Slaying the attackers earned Altair the gratitude of a band of monks, who allowed him to mingle among them as they approached the town square. There Altair use his special assassin's intuition to locate his



target and slip in for the kill. While the game has a complicated system for sword-to-sword combat, assassinating an oblivious target can be accomplished with a single button tap. And then... pandemonium. The crowd freaked, some fleeing while others began to riot. Unable to find a clear escape route amidst the chaos, the guards caught Altair and managed to slip a blade through his defenses. The screen went white, and suddenly Altair was staring into... a bank of computer monitors? Apparently there's a bit more to Assassin's Creed than initially meets the eye, but that aspect of the story is going to have to remain secret until the game's early 2007 release. (The developers did emphatically state that time travel was not involved.)

There's one more topic that Ubisoft is unwilling to discuss—"is Assassin's Creed a PS3-exclusive or what?" That question was always met with glazed-over eyes and the robotic non-answer "it is being



"Assassin's Creed will surely be a rallying point for the PlayStation faithful."

developed for the PlayStation 3." This probably means that Ubisoft has struck some sort of exclusivity deal with Sony where other versions of the game can't be released (or discussed) until some period of time after it hits for the PS3. In return, the trucks full of laundered cash, uncut cocaine and weapons-grade plutonium that Sony formerly sent to the Grand Theft Auto people are apparently now being diverted to Ubisoft. Wait—did I say cash, cocaine, and plutonium? Because I meant to say "marketing support."

Such deals aren't unusual, but it's a shame in this case. In terms of processing power, Assassin's Creed may have been the most ambitious game on the show floor, and would have been an excellent way to compare the power of the PS3 and Xbox 360. Can the 360 really handle the massive crowds of medieval Europe? I suppose the question is academic—whether the Xbox 360 version ends up being late, inferior, or non-existent, Assassin's Creed will surely be a rallying point for the PlayStation faithful. **play**



The special effects hit strong and often.

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer	Incognito	Available	November



Warhawk

The future of war

words Casey Loe

Sony has been getting plenty of bad press since the E3, and much of it is well-deserved. But it breaks my heart to see Sony's new six-axis controller dragged into the fray. Sure, it's 10-year old technology, and maybe it was a crass attempt to steal some of the Wii's thunder. But that's all politics; what matters is that the controller is intuitive, well-designed, and wonderfully responsive in practice.

The beauty of the controller is that it works exactly as you think it will; you'll be pulling off precision maneuvers in Warhawk within seconds, since the directions in which you subtly tilt your body while playing a 3D game are the same directions necessary to control your ship. While the most obvious applications are with flying and racing games, it's not hard to imagine the controller being used to control the camera (or the crosshairs) in a 3D shooter, or exploiting your natural instinct to cringe to control blocking and dodging in a game like God of War. In short: The six-axis controller = good thing.

I wish I could definitely say the same for Warhawk, but it's a bit too soon to

tell. (The placard on the demo station said it was only 30% done.) The game plays like a dream, putting you behind the wheel of a harrier-like jet that can perform strafing runs as easily as it can hover and shoot. You have a variety of weapons at your disposal, including a machine gun, rockets, and some sort of electrical cannon, but at the moment there isn't too much to do with them.

The demo area was an island fortified with defensive turrets and patrolled by many waves of enemy aircraft. The simple objectives involved flying around in circles blasting certain aircraft and installations, but the demo didn't go much deeper than that. The game looked nice, with decent water and misty particle clouds, but I'm hoping for much more excitement from the final. The controller seems perfectly capable of weave-through-the-Death-Star's-ventilation-port level precision, and hopefully future updates will provide more detailed environments and a good reason to get out of the empty sky and go tearing through the terrain. **play**



Nice poofs.

"The game plays like a dream, putting you behind the wheel of a harrier-like jet..."

Gears of War

A game to match the hype

words Brady Fiechter

Walking out of the private game-play session for Gears of War, an obnoxiously excited colleague exclaim: "This thing's going to be so fu**ing huge." There doesn't seem to be much disagreement on that one. Gears of War is set up to succeed on Xbox 360 in a similar way Halo was on Xbox. But let's drop comparisons to other games for now; Gears of War deserved its praise during E3 for the obvious reasons—it was a blast to play—and the more elusive reasons—it carried its own subtle identity.

The game is locked into a tight third-person perspective, which works mighty nice once you realize the duck-and-cover aspect to its more deliberately paced gameplay. Annoyingly but successfully, Microsoft chose to demonstrate only the multiplayer functions of Gears of War in playable form, revealing strong tactical strategies and the need to rely heavily on safety points—and the frightening power of the chain saw attachment on your

"Whatever the level of praise, you walked away from Gears of War impressed."

main weapon. Coming in for close kills was the star of the gameplay sessions, working the victim and those supplying the personal mutilations into an uproar of laughter and cursing. The game's creator Cliff Blezinski reflects on his blog how Bill Gates "[expressed] delight over the chain-saw complete with his best impression of the special move."

So yeah, Gears of War is quite violent, with plenty of exaggerated explosions, blood showers and severed limbs to work up the adrenaline. The edge of fantasy blends well with the gritty realism of a war being waged on home turf, and to answer the question we all need answering: yeah, the Xbox 360 has some major power under the hood. You'll not be hard pressed to find some praise for the game as the

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Epic Games	Available	2006



Big ba-da boom.

best-looking on the show floor. But whatever the level of praise, you walked away from Gears of War at least impressed. It's gonna be huge. **play**



System(s)	PS3, next-gen mobile	Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Square Enix	Available	TBA



Fabula Nova Crystallis: Final Fantasy

Let us begin..

words Nick Des Barres

What the heck has Square's Product Development Division been doing since 2003's *Final Fantasy X-2*? has been the question on many a Final Fantasy's fan's lips over the past year or so, as the utter silence from Yoshinori Kitase's A-Team (FFVI, VII, VIII, X, X-2) was beginning to get a bit deafening. We knew they were working on a next-generation Final Fantasy...but we sure didn't know they were doing so in collaboration with the Kingdom Hearts and Before Crisis: FFVII teams as well. Say namaste to the latest iteration of Square-Enix's "polymorphic content" scheme: Fabula Nova Crystallis: Final Fantasy XIII. According to Square-Enix head Yoichi Wada, Fabula Nova Crystallis (slightly wonky Latin for "New Tale of the Crystal") is planned as a ten-year project, with the core products being Kitase's Final Fantasy XIII, and Tetsuya Nomura's third game as a director, Final Fantasy Versus XIII, on PlayStation 3. The first spinoff will be Final Fantasy Agito XIII for as-yet-unreleased mobile phones. That's right... after Square tasted sweet success with Compilation of Final Fantasy VII, there will now be multiple flavors of Final Fantasy XIII for you and me. Cynics are quick to leap on this strategy as milking the fans dry...especially when every Fabula Nova Crystallis game isn't even strictly interrelated. All three announced projects take place in different worlds, with different characters, and

"All three announced projects take place in different worlds, with different characters..."

radically varying levels of culture. The only common thread is a Crystal creation myth that weaves throughout each game, linking them together on a thematic level. I hail it as an exciting development for two reasons: One, we're up to Final Fantasy *Thirteen*, folks. The numbers are beginning to get a bit unwieldy. Two, Final Fantasy XIII's "light" to Final Fantasy Versus XIII's "shadow," to borrow the words of Tetsuya Nomura, makes Versus's very existence possible (see below). Although Square Enix has released virtually zero information beyond the respective games' one-minute E3 trailers, we've done a bit of sleuthing with information gleaned from interviews, and from analyzing the trailers for hours on end. The staff of Fabula Nova Crystallis has gone on record as saying not to expect much new information until *next year's* E3; these games are still a long, long way off (Yasumi Matsuno's brilliant genre-exploding Final Fantasy XII isn't even out yet in America, for instance), and anything is subject to change. Without further ado, then, let's try to find out what this gigantic project is all about.



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XIII

The most advanced culture to ever appear in a Final Fantasy. A society having lived with magic for so many millennia, it has become an indispensable component of everyday life (imagine a world where people use machines to regulate the heat of traditional FF spell Fire to cook food, or a fusion of technology with spell Gravigade to defy gravity). An independent, strong-willed female hero, wielding a transformable weapon that can switch between sword and gun configurations. That's pretty much all we know about Final Fantasy XIII, along with the fact that it was in development on PlayStation 2 for two years, before Team Kitase

did the PS3 Final Fantasy VII Technical Demo at last year's E3 and decided to bump it up to next-gen. What we do know, however, is that sweet Lord, is it *pretty*. Though much prerendered CG was present in the trailer (and S-E makes no bones about it; FFXIII will feature as much FMV as any modern Final Fantasy ever has), two almost unbelievably gorgeous realtime scenes were shown: One, a furious battle between the as-yet-officially-unnamed main character and dozens of enemies, and a walk through an achingly beautiful, vast forest. It took the official pronouncement that both scenes were, indeed, running in realtime on the PlayStation 3 hardware to convince us it was true, such is their indistinguishability from the pre-rendered FMV. What kind of game is it? How many party members? Will battles have old-school screen transitions? We haven't a clue. What we do offer, however, is fairly extensive speculation based on the main gameplay sequence from the E3 demo, the battle scene. Close examination allows one to (more or less) figure out what the battles are all about:

Final Fantasy XIII Staff

Director: Motomu Toriyama (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2)

Character Designer: Tetsuya Nomura (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2)

Scenarist: Unknown, possibly Kazushige Nojima (FFVII, FFX, FFX-2)

Art Director: Isamu Kamikokuryo (FFX, FFXII)

Composer: Masashi Hamauzu (FFX, Dirge of Cerberus: FFXIII)

Main Theme: Nobuo Uematsu/Smile Please (FF Series)

Producer: Yoshinori Kitase (FF Series)



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Battle System



Navigation Map

Director Motomu Toriyama has emphasized the fact that XIII battles will be all about 360° of movement, with enemies assailing your characters from all sides, even dropping down from above. The map in the upper-left-hand portion of the screen would seem to support this: It doesn't seem to function as a "map" so much as a tool for selecting individual targets and gauging the distance between them and your party members. Why not opt for a more traditional target-selection scheme? The over-the-top, ever-shifting camerawork would simply not allow for it in a traditional manner -- you'd never have any idea where your cursor was.

Command & ATB Gauge

Individual turns seem to consist of multiple command selections, as evidenced by the string of five command boxes and ATB (Active Time Battle, traditional name for the FF battle system) gauge at the bottom of the screen. The loopy camera and vast range of battle motion (far beyond any traditional RPG ever seen) seems to be allowed by this scheme. One will select several commands, listed on the left along with an ATB cost (no evidence of MP anywhere) until your ATB points run out, and the game will then string them together in a visually-pleasing way, causing a simple "Attack" to be represented in any number of ways, from a sword strike to a vertical flip kick -- whatever looks coolest given the string. In addition to familiar FF commands, several new ones are visible in the menus: "V Strike", "Aerial", "Shoot", "Lure". With the main character reportedly having the ability to manipulate time and gravity, it's probably safe to expect a heavy emphasis on aerial attacks, launching of enemies skyward, and juggles.

Will XIII Even Have Parties?

It is worth noting no Final Fantasy has ever made its first showing without the maximum number of characters possible in a party (though the fourth "Guest" character slot in XII is an exception), and the lightning-quick action present in the E3 trailer wouldn't seem to lend itself to a traditional RPG battle system with multiple characters. Might Final Fantasy XIII feature the first "one-person party" in FF history? According to Toriyama, absolutely not: In an interview in the latest issue of Dengeki PlayStation magazine, he says the battles will be largely based on inter-linking and chaining of attacks between party members, as seen in the mind-boggling fight scenes of Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children.

Overclock Gauge

The Overclock System is the only new FFXIII gameplay system that has yet been officially revealed. Put simply, it's Matrix Bullet Time. The main character snaps small metallic balls embedded in her fingertips together, causing everything around her to slow down drastically -- almost halt. By contrast, however, she moves as quickly as normal, possibly allowing for crazy, fighting game-esque juggle combos. When she invokes "Overclock", the gauge in the upper-right-hand side of the screen slowly depletes, suggesting it will take the place of the traditional Limit Break-esque game system in FFXIII.

Is her name Lightning?

Consider this. The main character of every Kitase/Nomura (and Nomura's own Kingdom Hearts) Final Fantasy has had a sky naming theme for the main character: Cloud. Squall. Tidus ("Sun" in Ryukyu). Sora ("Sky" in Japanese). Take a look at the FFXIII battle screen. To the left of the ATB/HP bar, this mystery word: LIGHTNING. What could it be, given its prominent placement? Certainly nothing to do with the traditional FF electrical spell, "Thunder". An elemental type? A battle style? A configuration for the main character's Gunblade-ish weapon? Or...her name? If the main character isn't named Lightning, where else could the name possibly go? High speculation, to be sure, but Play posits the idea that our strawberry-blonde heroine will bear the name Lightning when FFXIII is released some time next year.



Versus XIII

Despite its later release, we actually know more about this game than XIII proper, thanks to Tetsuya Nomura's loose lips. Versus (pronounced *Vehrsas*, as in the Latin, meaning both "versus" in the English sense, and "a change of direction") is an action RPG...not surprising, since that's what the KH team specializes in. Nomura has said the only reason Versus XIII can exist as a Final Fantasy is the fact that there's already vanilla XIII. You see, Versus is an utter tragedy of Shakespearean proportions -- indeed the inspiration for the story is a line from Hamlet, Act II, Scene II: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." In addition, it breaks another FF taboo by beginning its game in a nearly real-world setting. The unnamed main character is a member of the royal house that rules the last city on the planet to have control of Crystals (and hence, magic), and its culture is directly equatable to our own. The world outside the city, however, is roughly medieval, and the marauding barbarian outsiders wage a constant war with the residents of the city to take control of its wonderful Crystals. The themes of Versus XIII are "bonding", "friendship", and "sleep", as evidenced by its logo, but Nomura warns us to expect the darkest, most devastatingly tragic Final Fantasy game of all time -- indeed joking that he expects people to cry for a week upon completing it. At the same time, however, he isn't pursuing tragedy for tragedy's sake, and doesn't want people to come off the experience having felt they'd be better off not having played the game at all. It's simply the only way this story can be told, he says. Active development on Final Fantasy Versus XIII has only just begun by the Kingdom Hearts team, and is the furthest-off Fabula Nova Crystallis game. The E3 trailer consisted entirely of pre-rendered footage, so it may be safe to assume we won't be playing the first main-continuity Final Fantasy action RPG until 2008.

Final Fantasy Versus XIII Staff

Director: Tetsuya Nomura (FFVII: Advent Children, Kingdom Hearts, Kingdom Hearts II)

Character Designer: Tetsuya Nomura (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2, KH, KHII)

Scenarist: Unknown, possibly Tetsuya Nomura and/or Kazushige Nojima (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2, KH, KHII)

Composer: Yoko Shimomura (KH, KHII, Super Mario RPG, Street Fighter II)

Producer: Shinji Hashimoto (FF Series, KH Series)



Agito XIII

Final Fantasy Agito (Latin for "to perform an action") XIII is an online RPG (though not an MMORPG, director Hajime Tabata is quick to stress) designed for next-generation mobile phones, to be developed by the team responsible for Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII and the upcoming Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII. Players will select one of twelve students from a magic school known as Peritium, and go about their daily lives interacting with fellow students. Tabata says we can expect a more open-ended game than Before Crisis's mission-based format, though he admits Agito is so early in development it doesn't even have a target platform yet. As Japanese cell phone technology is significantly more advanced than those in America, it remains to be seen whether a Western release will even be viable in the near future. More information as it becomes available.

Final Fantasy Agito XIII Staff

Director: Hajime Tabata (Before Crisis: FFXVII, Crisis Core: FFXVII)

Character Designer: Tetsuya Nomura (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2)

Scenarist: Unknown, possibly Kazushige Nojima (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX, FFX-2, KH, KHII)

Art Director: Yusuke Naora (FFVII, FFXIII, FFX)

Composer: Takeharu Ishimoto (Before Crisis: FFXVII, Crisis Core: FFXVII)

Producer: Kousei Ito (Before Crisis: FFXVII)

Final Fantasy Haeresis XIII?

In addition to the three announced Fabula Nova Crystallis projects, Square Enix has also trademarked "Final Fantasy Haeresis ('Heresy') XIII". What this may (or may not) become is anyone's guess, and speculation ranges from S-E's next MMORPG, to a manga series, to a PSP game. Only time will tell.

Note: Our tentative attribution of the Fabula Nova Crystallis storyline to Kazushige Nojima stems from a Crisis Core: FFXVII article in the latest issue of Dengeki PlayStation magazine that lists FFXIII among his credits, along with logic based on the fact he has scripted every Kitase/Nomura Final Fantasy since FFXVII. Keep in mind that this may, of course, be in error, as Square Enix has not yet officially announced any scenarist for the FFXIII project.

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	BioWare	Available	Fall 2006

Mass Effect

Space: the fantastic frontier...

words Greg Orlando

There's actual
emotion in the
faces...

Talk is cheap, but in BioWare's Mass Effect, it's simply astounding.

It seems almost silly to mention, but Effect revolutionizes the simple act of talking in video games. Conversations in the stunning role-playing game take place in real-time, with players able to formulate responses as other characters are speaking. Gone are dialogue trees and their resultant awkward pauses between speakers' commentaries.

This is the next generation, and it's not just all about prettier graphics. Now, when the game's hero confronts a bartender in a tense scene, the responses can come in rapid-fire succession, and culminate with one of the participants shoving a gun in the other's face. Games had previously had to rely on their dialogue and players' imaginations to create tension. Effect can do it by allowing players to react immediately in a conversation and fire off a response in an equally quick fashion. Arguments here are fast-paced and emotional, fueled by aliens and humans who can express themselves with body language and facial expressions. "We need our characters to be digital actors," David Falkner, the game's lead programmer says.

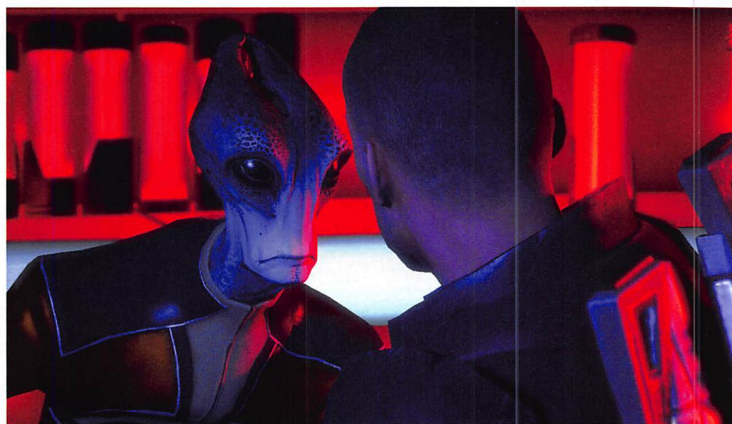
The universe teeters on the brink of annihilation in the role-playing game Effect. Players take the role of a human defender tasked with staving off an invasion by cybernetic marauders by any

"... players can wholly customize their hero, right down to his personal history."

means necessary. With this, the stage is set for a sweeping adventure that will be told in three parts over the course of the Xbox 360's lifetime.

As befitting an RPG, players can wholly customize their hero, right down to his personal history. This hero will be able to fly around in a spaceship called the Normandy, travel on alien worlds in three-man adventuring parties, and can access a series of supernatural powers called biotics. Armors and weapons in the game, and there will be the standard huge selection of both, can be altered and augmented with modifications to suit a player's needs. Vehicles can be used to zoom across alien worlds, and vehicle-based combat will supplement the game's squad-based on-foot warfare. In motion, the game is best described as gorgeous. Alien landscapes and indoor environments are suitably exotic and showcase the Xbox 360's graphical capabilities.

For May's Electronic Entertainment Expo, BioWare showcased both Effect's conversation and its combat, and the demonstration, despite its brevity, was suitably impressive. During brawls, players can pause the action to issue specific commands to their characters, moving



them to strategically advantageous positions in order to herd enemies into traps or create crossfire zones to tear the bad guys a new one. **play**

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Real Time Worlds	Available	TBA

Crackdown

Bigger, Badder, Better...

words Dave Halverson

Open-world gaming has come a long way in a relatively short time thus far in the evolution of next-generation consoles, but none so much as Crackdown; the only OWG that might give GTA a run for its money. The granddaddy of them all has yet to make its (simultaneous) next-gen console debut, however, with Dave Jones, the creative mastermind behind Grand Theft Auto working on Crackdown, it's anyone's guess which game will burn the brightest. Crackdown endeavors to combine elements of urban chaos with superhero-like powers, the end result of which is simply outstanding. Beyond anything the Hulk or Spiderman has wrought, the protagonist (of your own design) is more lethal weapon than armed thug, as his genetic tendencies mutate his abilities until he's making football field-length leaps, running at blistering speeds, handling weapons that make the BFG look like a super-squirt and tossing around automobiles like large beer cans. That is when he's not driving around the massive open world of Pacific City (in the best designed vehicles thus far in any 3D

Open world
gaming
just got a
whole lot
BIGGER.



"Crackdown endeavors to combine elements of urban chaos with superhero-like powers, the end result of which is simply outstanding."



game), a grime-addled urban center. Calling shotgun is a first too, as two players can simultaneously clean up the streets, yanking telephone poles out of the ground to use as massive bats or anything else they can rip from the environment. Brought to you in 5.1 Dolby Surround featuring over 100 licensed tracks that play in accord with the ebb and flow of the game (you'll know when the syndicate is bearing down on you by the change in music alone—very cinematic), Crackdown is OWG evolved. **play**

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	Available	Q4 2006

Rainbow Six Vegas

What dies in Vegas stays in Vegas

words Casey Lee

No publisher has hit the ground running on next generation platforms as skillfully as Ubisoft has, and it looks like their streak won't be stopping anytime soon. Just as *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* won over droves of gamers who had never cared about the series before, *Vegas* may finally catch the eye of casual gamers who don't know *Rainbow Six* from *Rainbow Brite*.

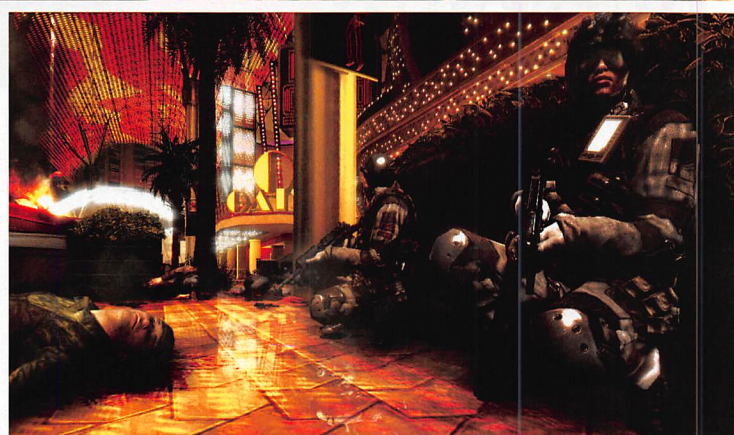
The single-player campaign takes place entirely in Las Vegas, where hero Logan Keller and his team must rescue the seven Color Kids and reclaim the Color Belt from the villainous Murky Dism... no, wait, now I'm mixing it up with *Rainbow Brite*. *Rainbow Six* involves terrorists and blowing the living crap out of Las Vegas.

There's no doubt that *Vegas* handles the blowing stuff up part with aplomb. The artists at Ubi have done a fantastic job of recreating the city's luxury hotel vibe, and everything in the environment can be obliterated in the most satisfying way possible. One of the highlights of the demo was a firefight in a casino floor where

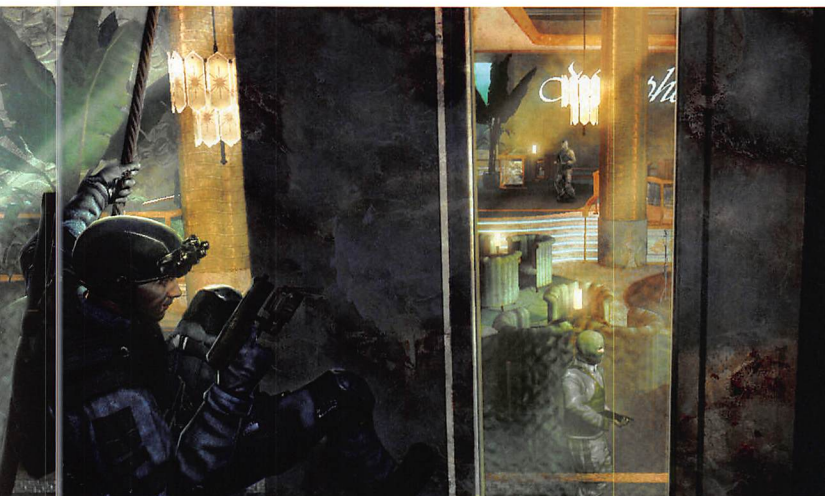
"...wait, now I'm mixing it up with *Rainbow Brite*. *Rainbow Six* involves terrorists and blowing the living crap out of Las Vegas."

stray bullets were constantly punching through slot machines to send noisy torrents of coins pouring onto the floor.

We couldn't get our hands on the controller to try it out for ourselves, but the controls looked simple and robust. One new option is the ability to "tag" enemies so that you can order your two teammates to each eliminate a specific target. But giving orders won't be necessary in multiplayer, where teams of three friends can play through the entire single-player campaign in co-op mode. **play**



Maybe he'll have better luck on the slots.



Arthur and the Minimoys

Etranges Libellules

Big adventure in a tiny land

If the words Fifth Element don't ring your bell, then perhaps The Transporter, The Big Blue, Kiss of the Dragon, or Nikita will get it bonging. Based on the book by Mr. Besson himself—and currently in post-production awaiting its Q1 2007 feature film debut starring the voices of David Bowie, Mia Farrow, Snoop Dogg and Madonna—the story is of ten-year-old Arthur, who, in a bid to save his grandfather's house from

words Dave Halverson



"A tiny people that also happen to be the epitome of fantasy character design."



being demolished, goes looking for some much-fabled hidden treasure in the land of the Minimoys, a tiny people living in harmony with nature. ...A tiny people that also happen to be the epitome of fantasy character design—the kind of visual wonder I'd hoped to run into more often at E3, especially on next-gen, but not to worry, the game looks and plays absolutely brilliantly on PC and PS2, and sequels are almost positively assured. **play**

Where there's a hollow log there's a way across.

Alone in the Dark

Uwe Boll has nothing to do with this game...

words Greg Orlando

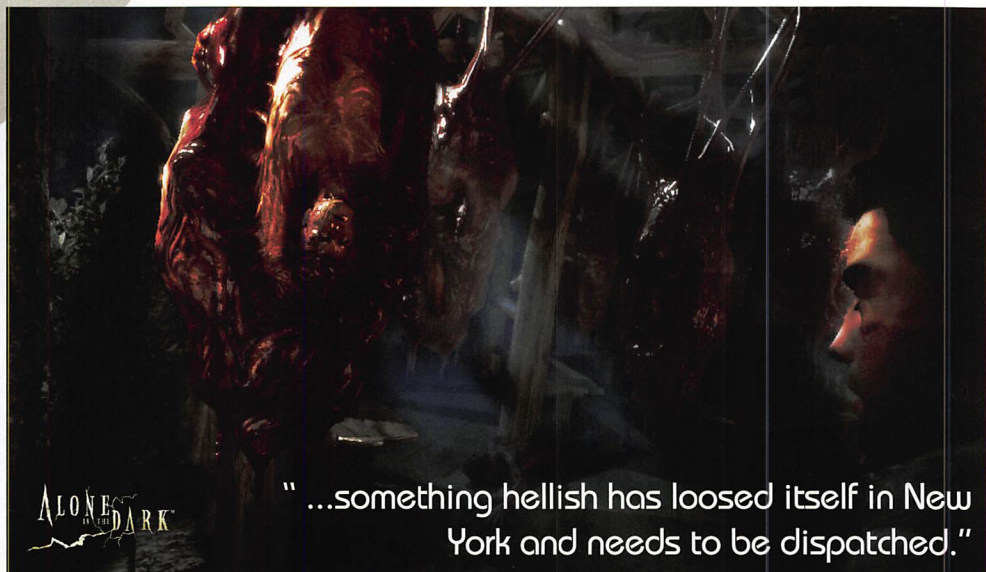
System(s)	PlayStation 3, PC, Xbox 360	Publisher	Atari
Developer	Eden Studios	Available	Winter 2006

Deliciously witted game writers have been referring to Atari's latest survival horror title as *Alone in the Park*. It's fitting considering the game focuses on New York's sprawling Central Park and the non-mugger and creepy insane religious-nonsense-spouting wackjob horrors contained therein. The game stars detective Edward Carnby, who was the protagonist in the very first *Alone in the Dark*. This is odd, of course, because this new *Dark* takes place in 2006, some 70-plus years after the events of the first game—and Carnby looks as if he hasn't aged at all.

Dark centers on the mysteries of life and death, and players will get to learn

players won't ever find themselves going for long stretches desperately trying to find a save point. Each episode will be a mini-story of its own, fitting neatly within the larger whole, and containing a build-up to a climactic event before its eventual resolution.

Atari showed off *Dark*'s gameplay at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo. One of the game's most interesting facets was its lack of interface. Carnby can only carry what he can hold in his two hands and in his pockets and, instead of pulling an item from an inventory menu, he must physically search for an object in his possession. It's certainly addition by subtraction, but the overall effect on



"...something hellish has loosed itself in New York and needs to be dispatched."

the true secret behind the existence of Central Park. Its plot offers up the very plausible explanation that something hellish has loosed itself in New York and needs to be dispatched. Players can expect suitable amounts of blood and gore; at a pre-E3 game event, Atari reveled in showing not much of *Dark*'s actual gameplay, but many, many shots of corpses hanging upside-down and with their skins removed.

Developer Eden has been concentrating on breaking the game down into digestible chunks, which it likens to episodic content as seen in TV shows such as *Prison Break* and *24*. In this way,

play seems to be minimal. Games such as *Resident Evil* manage to keep their level of foreboding high while still utilizing interfaces to manage a player's junk.

Carnby will have to hotwire cars, drive through Central Park, use both his wits and his guns to make it out of this adventure intact. In one of the game's tutorial scenes, Carnby is chased through an abandoned apartment by something entirely unexpected (architectural flaws!) and finally hurtled out into the night air, clinging perilously to a stone gargoyle—it's astounding how Atari and Eden have captured the true New York experience. **play**



Who's there?! Ah shi...



System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Insomniac	Available	November

Resistance Fall of Man

War of the worlds

words Brady Fiechter

Insomniac hasn't been playing around in happy land its entire life. Before the lighter heroics of the Spyro the Dragons and Ratchet and Clanks, a bleak futuristic first-person shooter called Disruptor put the Insomniac brand on the map. Bleak is back. Military-themed violence is in. World war is an ostensive well spring of inspiration. And so lives Resistance: Fall of Man.

The game takes place in a fictional version of 1951, in a time when WWII never happened.

Instead of global chaos pitting man against man, we've now got global chaos pitting man against mutated alien man. These alien beings are known as chimera; their origin and reason for being will be explained throughout the game's plotting, but for now, the big detail of the moment is that they carry weapons and do what enemies normally do in a first-person shooter: shoot back.

Insomniac expresses that the chimera will range dramatically in size and ability, some exhibiting more human-like tendencies, while others will surprise with unusual characteristics. In one particular



"Full appreciation of the Resistance demo comes after some extended play time..."

moment of evil, a spindly little crab-like creature jumped up an allied soldier and slit his throat. Another, more immediately intimidating enemy, managed to snap a soldier in two. Intervention in moments like these are possible, rewarding you AI assistance from the ally you happen to rescue.

Full appreciation of the Resistance demo comes after some extended play time, revealing an impressive physics system and control scheme that feels better

than many of the other shooters I played at the show. And while the game sure did come across as a typical balls-out first-person experience, Insomniac stresses that an element of survival horror is being tapped into. There's much to come on this propulsive PS3 launch title. **play**



What has four legs and is about to eat your face?

Okami

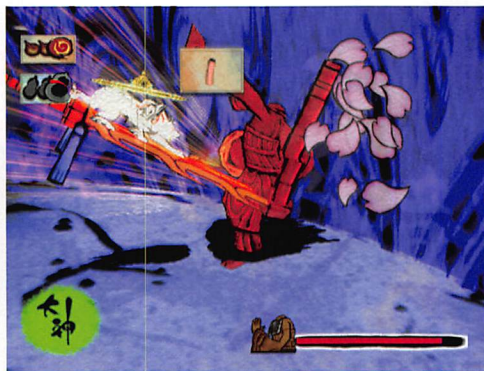
The art of gaming

words Casey Loe

While Okami was making its English language debut at the E3, it was already enjoying stellar reviews in its native land. Having spent 30 hours on the import version, I can promise you that Okami lives up to the hype and, if anything, exceeds it.

In a time when most developers struggle and fail to find a single new concept around which to build their games, Clover has piled so many good ideas into Okami that they could easily have split them up to make a half-dozen different titles. The most obvious hook is the visual style, which emulates asian sumi-e brush painting to create a stunningly distinctive look. The environments are rendered in 3D but have thick black outlines from any angle, and all shadows are a perfect slash of black paint. What the screen shots don't show is that the game is awash in motion, as painted flames crackle, and petals soar on hand-drawn wind.

Clover has found the perfect mechanic to compliment the art style. By pressing the R2 button you can pause the action, pull up a paintbrush, and create your own sumi-e brushstrokes. If a bridge breaks, you can draw it back in. A looping swirl will send the wind blowing in the direction



Savor every minute of it. Games like Okami are, at the very least, endangered.



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Clover	Available	September



"I can promise you that Okami lives up to the hype and, if anything, exceeds it."

you choose, a circled tree will burst into bloom, and a crack in the wall will explode when you draw the shape of a bomb. Tired of the night? Draw a sun. Tired of the light? Draw a moon. These "celestial brush" abilities are acquired on the course of your quest, similar to gaining new songs and items in a Zelda game, but all are accessible at any time without the hassles of inventory.

The paradox of Okami is that while it has so many original elements—its distinctive look, its mythical Japanese setting, its brilliant brush system, the strange but satisfying feel of controlling a four-legged hero—it ends up feeling amazingly similar to recent Legend of Zelda games. The game follows a very similar structure town-field-dungeon structure, and as in any good Zelda title, you can spend hours using your new abilities in old areas, exploring hidden nooks, and searching for buried treasures.

One great twist is that you don't gain experience from combat; only from doing good deeds such as purifying cursed terrain and feeding hungry animals.

The English version that was unveiled at the E3 is as faithful to the original as possible, which includes maintaining the important role sake has in the story. (And in this ridiculous political climate, I wouldn't be shocked if Okami got stuck with an M rating because of it.) That's good news for the most part, since we won't have to face the nightmare of seeing Okami's unique setting get butchered because it was too "Japanesey." But there is one area in wish I hope they won't be so faithful—the combat in the Japanese version is ridiculously simple, and may be too easy to fully engage western players. But despite that minor flaw, Okami stands as one of the best games of the show and is an early contender for game of the year. **play**

Too Human

Homo Sapien Like You

In video game terms, Silicon Knights' Too Human is an old soul. The game has been in development, in one form or another, since the days of the original PlayStation. It had been slated for release on the Nintendo GameCube, too, before it finally found a home on the Xbox 360. While death and taxes (and perhaps the inherent unfunny of prop comic Carrot Top) are life's only certainties, it's safe to say Too Human will not be straying from its new intended home. For Human, it's Xbox 360 or bust—and most likely by year's end.

Too Human features a protagonist in Baldur, who's commonly described as a cybernetic god. In Norse mythology, Baldur was the son of Odin, father of the gods, and was slain by a spear made up of the only substance on Earth that could kill him: mistletoe. In Human, Baldur serves as humanity's protector, killing machines aplenty with an impressive supply of melee- and long-range weapons such as maces, swords, and energy-

words Greg Orlando

"...Human has been likened to games as disparate as Capcom's Devil May Cry and Konami's Contra."

based guns.

Combat-laden and action-heavy, Human has been likened to games as disparate as Capcom's Devil May Cry and Konami's Contra. Yet its developers have tapped the game as something a bit different, something more dependent on story and possessed of a definite cinematic feel. Already the game has been tapped as the first part of a trilogy, and Silicon Knights has stated it's plotting the



Norse mythology—evolved.



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	Silicon Knights	Available	Winter 2006



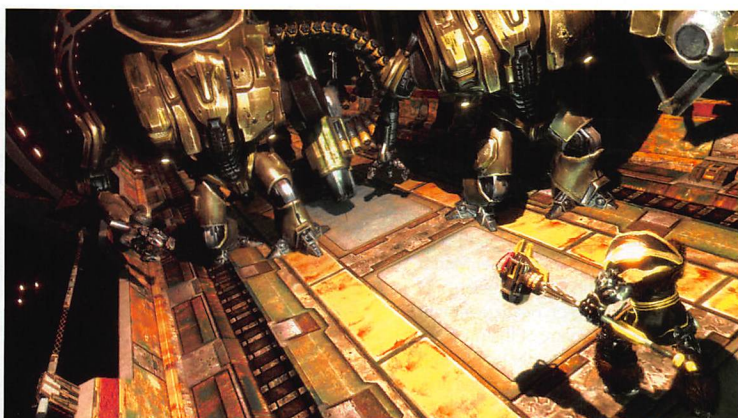
events for the second title concurrently with the completion of Human. Camera control, too, has been removed from players' hands, allowing the developers to punctuate the game's action with predetermined perspectives, zooms, cuts, and pans.

Human's combat also plays out in the manner of a Hollywood film. Baldur can perform sweeping aerial attacks that can be chained together in a cinematic frenzy. The hero can stay in the air as long as he's striking an enemy, which means it's entirely possible to chew through most of a game's level without touching terra firma. Attacks are handled with the Xbox 360's right analog stick, with all controls relative to the camera's alignment.

Baldur, a malleable hero whose moves are being created by choreographers

from Hong Kong action flicks, can remake himself with a series of upgrades altering his strength or speed. Items found during play will allow for the alteration of both the hero's look and his weaponry, too, with the ultimate result being that no two Baldurs will likely ever be identical. This is a good thing, as cooperative play has been planned for Xbox 360 Live.

The version of Human shown by Silicon Knights at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) was, fittingly, all too human in its flaws. The game's framerate had yet to be stabilized, and there were moments of great slowdown to be had. A more suitable 30 or perhaps even 60 frames of animation per second will be achieved before the product moves out the door—as the now long-dead English poet Alexander Pope noted, to err is human. **play**



Viva Piñata

Gotta Smash 'Em All...

words Greg Orlando

Questions abounded when Microsoft announced Viva Piñata, a whimsical game about raising party favors. Chief among these was, *Is this a real game?* Also: *No, really, is this a real game?*

Microsoft is deadly serious about the all-in-good-fun Piñata. Developer Rare, known for such titles as the Nintendo 64's Banjo-Kazooie and the arcade fighter Killer Instinct, has been working on the title for two years. It will see release at the time the Viva Piñata animated TV show will launch on the Fox network. And yes, the game is more weird than normality on Bizarro World—which is itself fairly weird indeed.

Brightly colored, and reminiscent of a child's sugar-induced hallucination, Piñata allows players to create their own garden and care for more than 60 different cartoonish animals such as bears, alligators, sheep, and birds. Gardens can be tended to suit a player's needs: fences can be put

up, shelters dropped in for the piñatas, holes dug to create ponds, and crops both planted and watered. If done well, colorful critters will be attracted to a player's lands, and can then be captured, bred, and raised. Breeding is accomplished via minigames; within the privacy of one of the game's structures, two piñata will meet, with the player required, say, to guide two worms through a maze to create a successful fertilization.

Although the game has been built for children, it has a depth and charm that will certainly appeal to the big-boy set. Strategic elements require a player to separate different breeds of animals to ensure a harmonious garden. Successful management of a garden allows for expansion, which in turn increases a player's ability to find and raise new species of piñata.

No omelet was ever made without the breaking of a few eggs, and no gar-

den in Piñata will be grown without split seeds—or, in this case, candy. Sour piñatas, marked as such by their red coloring and evil disposition, will attempt to tear up a player's gardens. These malicious creatures can be tamed (Rare won't reveal how), beat down in combat, or boxed up

and shipped out to unsuspecting dupes in the game's online modes. Sour candy, spilled when a bad piñata breaks apart, will infect tame animals if they eat it.

Chocolate coins, earned during gameplay, allows for the purchase of special items and buildings. In-game creatures can be decorated with an array of goofy accoutrements such as moustaches, hats, glasses, and hair styles. Via Xbox 360 Live, players will also be able to purchase, with real money, extra piñatas and other exclusive content.

And while it's likely the game will inspire laughter with its zany concept and bizarre approach to farming, it is not at all a joke.

"...more weird than normality on Bizarro World—which is itself fairly weird indeed."



System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	Nintendo	Available	TBA

Super Mario Galaxy

Giving Mario some space

words Casey Lee



I'm so happy to see Mario back that I'm even willing to forgive his prolonged absence from console gaming. Okay, it is true that I spent the first half of my Super Mario Galaxy playtime yelling at the screen "you still owe me Mario 128, you fat [expletive]," and "how could you let the GameCube launch with Luigi's [expletive] Mansion!?" But once the security guard released me from the headlock and the taser-inflicted muscle paralysis began to fade, there was nothing but love between Mario and I.

Super Mario Galaxy is just too beautiful to hold a grudge. In a sea of Wii titles that look disturbingly identical to their GameCube predecessors, Super Mario Galaxy is the lone title that actually looks like it's running on next-generation hardware. I'm sure many of the other titles will get a fresh coat of pretty before they're released, but Mario is already miles ahead of the pack.

The title isn't just a cute play on Super Mario World—the demo takes place entirely in a galaxy composed of dozens of Starbucks-sized planets, each with earthlike gravity that holds Mario to any

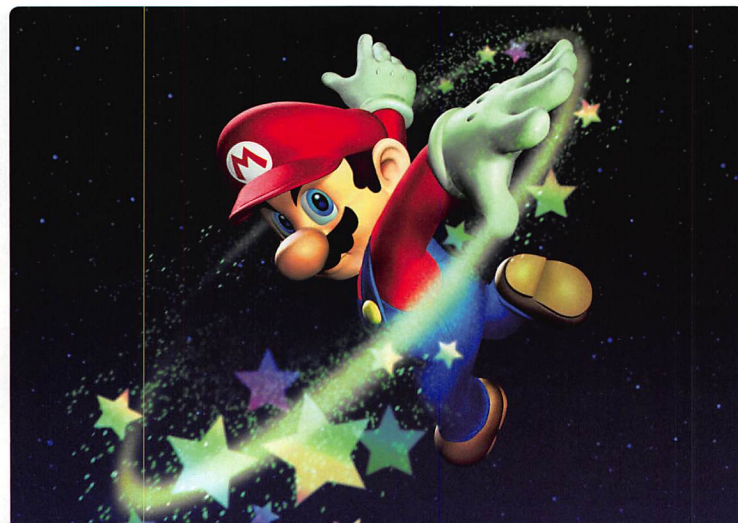
side of the surface until he finds the red star that will propel him to the next one. The planets range from featureless rocks to fully developed miniature worlds, and you never know what oddity you'll find on the other side of a planet as the horizon turns; a ruined castle, an erupting volcano, or even a crashed pirate ship. Each of the twenty to thirty planets in the demo felt distinct and creative, but there wasn't much time to admire them—the fast-paced gameplay had us zipping through a half-dozen planets per minute.

The astrophysics of Super Mario Galaxy may be questionable, but the play mechanics are rock-solid. Mario

"...the lone title that actually looks like's it running on next-generation hardware."

has his typical moves (plus a new spin attack), and he interacts with his Goomba, Koopa, and Bullet Bills foes in the usual satisfying ways. The Wii-driven twist is that in addition to controlling Mario, you also direct a star-shaped cursor by pointing with the remote. In the demo, the star cursor can ring bells, stun foes, and collect certain items, and it will surely have many more functions in the final game. While nothing has been officially announced, comments made by the development team suggest that you'll be able to split control of Mario and the star cursor between two players.

While the demo was fantastic, it offered no clues about the structure of the final product. Will the entire game be composed of a single massive galaxy composed entirely of tiny planets? Or is the galaxy a framing device for levels based on larger planets? Or is this just a particularly unique level in a more conventional game? I wish we knew more, but the demo left me convinced of one thing—Luigi's [expletive] Mansion this ain't. **play**



Lost Planet

Snow job...



words Greg Orlando

Don't be surprised if, during the course of Capcom's action-shooter Lost Planet, there's a Planet of the Apes moment when the protagonist gnashes his teeth and beats at his chest after realizing he's been on Earth all along. Consider this planet to be found—it's right where it's always been: between Venus and Mars.

A third-person shooter, Planet has players fighting off an alien invasion and battling villainous snow pirates on a frozen wasteland. Defeated enemies release blobs of energy that are used to sustain the hero; When the energy runs out, death is a safe bet. The protagonist here can hold two guns at a time, use a special grapple gun allowing him to zip up onto platforms, and will be able to hop into the cockpit of a

giant robot at certain points in the game.

Capcom's done a stellar job in creating a creepy set of snow-choked environments, and emphasizes a sense of alienation by summoning up storms where visibility is dramatically reduced. Insect-like aliens add to the game's sense of foreboding—this may be Earth (even if Capcom isn't coming right out and saying as much), but it's certainly not home. At once beautiful and haunting, Planet seems to be one of the Xbox 360s most intriguing third-party titles to date.

"Insect-like aliens add to the game's sense of foreboding..."



Heavenly Sword

Take down the King

words Brady Fiechter

One of the more visually striking games at E3, Heavenly Sword is as much captivating artistry as it is technical spectacle. The acrobatic finishing moves, the rich character designs, the incredible animations and physics—one gorgeous sight after another. The game on

display may have been somewhat deceiving, coming off as an arena fighter—and a responsive, excitingly dynamic one at that. But it would seem the game will take a turn into a little adventure and storytelling.

The Heavenly Sword in the title refers to an ancient sword, imbued with the power



System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Ninja Theory	Available	2007



of a god and now in the hands of our hero, Nariko. Her mission: basically kill an invading King and his army before her own life is taken by the curse of the sword. The action involves short and long-range attacks, offering up quick-time events that put the game into a more cinematic mode. The battles are fierce and filled with all sorts of destructible chaos. Awesome stuff.

All the combo-bashing goodness on display is getting the Hollywood treatment as well: Andy Serkis, who brought Gollum

to virtual life in Lord of the Rings, is starring as the villain and helping out with various stages of the creative process.

"The acrobatic finishing moves, the rich character designs, the incredible animations..."

Haze

Jungle madness

words Brady Fiechter

Twenty-five years from now, the government still loves us. So much so that it's willing to spread the wealth of war with private corporations like Mantel. It's all for a good cause, as you, Jake Carpenter, understand first-hand, enlisted as a super-soldier in Mantel's skirmish against a band of renegades in the South American jungle. Jake's been trained to be an extra special killing machine, privy to hi-tech weapons and even a little genetic enhancement.

Yeah, blah blah blah. But here's the twist: confronted with a soldier begging for his life in the game's opening, you gun him down where he stands. The screen fills with static. Might we be dealing with the banalities of video-game war in a different light? Developer Free Radical says yes, attempting to bring a sense of moral conviction and film-like gravity to their latest first-person shooter. The outline for Haze sounds compelling, the presenta-

tion looks great—a touch of fantasy filters through the harsh militaristic setting—and Free Radical's distinct sense of design is immediately apparent.

"Might we be dealing with the banalities of video-game war in a different light?"

Like most games at E3, Haze was a nicely polished blink-and-you-miss-it demo, but I quite liked what I saw. The action is being designed to authenticate a more treacherous feeling of battle; the design team took a few paintball outings to get the idea across that you can't just stand in front of someone with a gun in the open.

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Free Radical	Available	2007



Silent Hill: Origins

Back to hell

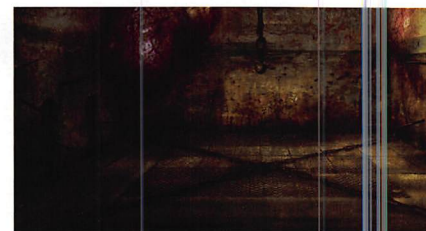
words Eric Patterson

The newest chapter in the Silent Hill series was unveiled at E3, and the number on that chapter ended up being zero. Silent Hill: Origins takes place before the original game, and tells the

story of how the town and its "issues" came to be. (Don't worry, they aren't going to give away too much.) Taking a look back at what made the series as beloved as it is, the developers

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	Winter 2006

are crafting a game that both strengthens the classic elements of the series, while also breaking new ground. Special attention is being paid to how the hero, Travis, controls and acts during the game, and a new, over the shoulder camera system both helps Origins adapt to the smaller screen, while also striving to provide a fresh new experience. As well, a lot of



care is going into the combat engine, to help avoid various problems from the previous games, but equally important will be the new batch of puzzles scattered throughout your journey. Of course, you can't have the history of Silent Hill without some familiar elements; players will recognize various locations and characters, but a healthy dose of new and previously unseen content will also be in the mix.

"...you can't have the history of Silent Hill without some familiar elements."

Lunar Knights

Better than Boktai and no sunscreen needed

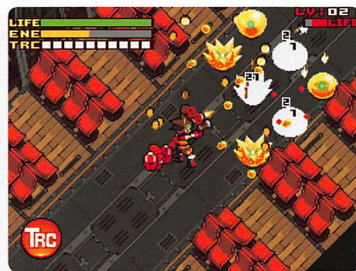
words Dave Halverson

I disliked Boktai...Playing a game in the burning sun, fighting glare and the neighbor's cat had to be the worst idea since that kid strapped a Virtual Boy to his head and walked into a ditch. Bitter that I missed two awesome Kojima Studios top-down 2D actioners, I rued the day the series made the leap to DS, until I saw Lunar Knights. Sweet retribution is at hand via substituting the DS's top screen for the moon and sun, both of which affect the game, which, gratefully, is not a sequel.

This descent is a more gothic one, divided between two characters: Aaron, who derives power from the sun, and Lucian who is at his best by the light of the moon. Harnessing the power of virtual weather, the ever-changing conditions (which shift and change in real-time 3D) and the elements left by the varying conditions play a vital role in the game's evolution. Puddles will raise platforms to reach new areas while windstorms will allow you to sail over deep chasms. Speaking of windstorms, you won't get far without occasionally blowing profusely into the NDS's mic. Blowing cool air (keep the Mentos close by) creates a chilling snowstorm—the strength of which is determined by how deep you exhale and how hard you blow. Other special attacks are conjured in more traditional fashion. Slashing opponents builds up TRC which can be spent to trigger 3D burst attacks. Draw a circle around an enemy and watch your victim fry in agony, or draw a sliding motion at the bottom of the screen to rain down boulders. Perhaps the most surprising (and addicting) new feature though,



is the full-fledged 3D shooting stages flying the Casket Rocket to dispose of your undead enemies' remains. Classic Axelay shooting abounds, only you must navigate and shoot via the stylus. Don't overlook the fact that Kojima Productions also has some Wi-Fi features planned but they remain under wraps for now. And let us not forget the cinemas from 4 Degrees, of "Memories" and "The Animatrix" fame. Lunar Knights will be one of the very brightest spots in an already stellar '06 NDS lineup, bursting with some of the best pure games and innovation of any current system.



System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Kojima Productions	Available	Winter



The Doppler 7000's got nothing on your NDS.



"Sweet retribution is at hand via substituting the DS's top screen for the moon and sun..."



Dead Rising

Come get some

words Brady Fiechter

Dead Rising was pretty much written off at E3 2005 as little more than a flat, uninspired retread of the zombie thing. That was then—unplayable, way early, way uninteresting—and this is now—totally playable, way cool, way addictive. Dead Rising came away from E3 2006 receiving a ton of unexpected praise, deserving every bit; this is gonna be a good one.

There wasn't a whole lot more shown that I haven't seen already, just more of a polished, complete section of the mall to run around in as the hundreds of undead went about their business. Going about my business included: finding a stylish hat in the menswear; grabbing a tire iron in hardware as my shotgun ran out of ammunition; refusing to rescue a trapped mallgoer because I was having too much fun waiting for her to get mauled; attempting to take dramatic shots of zombies doing zombie stuff, like eating people and shambling down the escalator; and best of all, delighting in

the fact that so many freaking zombies are onscreen at once.

The game continues to show an element of surprising depth too. Even if you normally might not go for this type of game, Dead Rising deserves a look. Huge fun.



System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	August



"I was having too much fun waiting for her to get mauled..."



Eragon

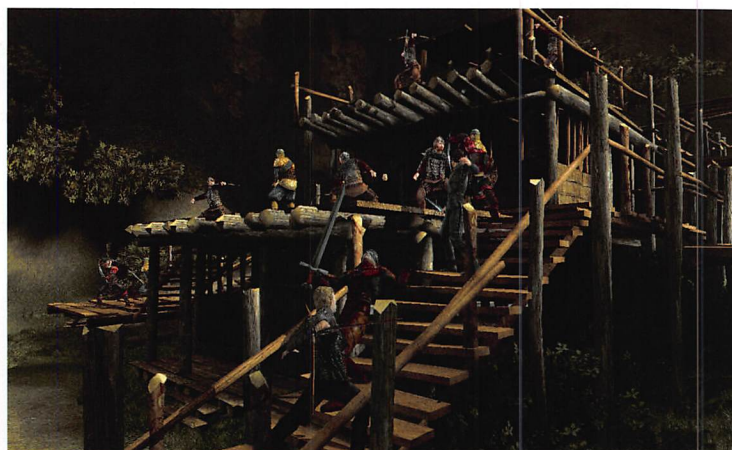
Dragon born

words Dave Halverson

Sitting in a darkened room behind a false wall within the Vivendi Universal Games structure, to my left was the PS2 version of Eragon (based on the upcoming dragon-infused blockbuster film) and to my right the game on running on

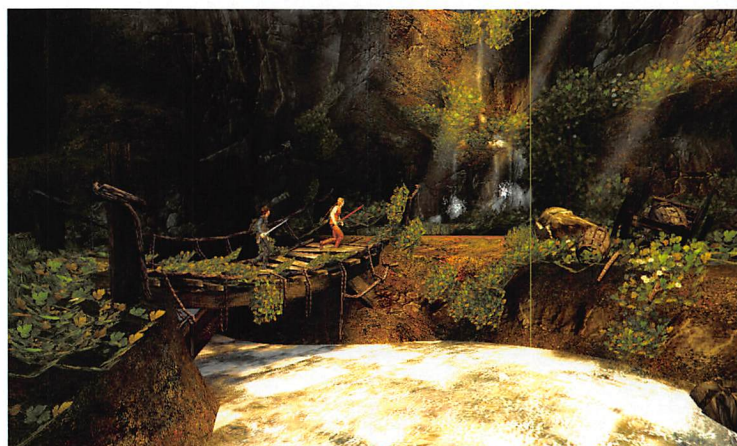
Xbox 360. ...God bless HD and next-gen. My eyes trained solely to the right: this is one game that is getting the full next-gen treatment in contrast to its last-gen brethren, which looks great for what it is, but side-by-side acts as the best Xbox 360

System(s)	PS2, Xbox 360	Publisher	VU Games
Developer	Stormfront Studios	Available	Fall 2006



advertisement MGS could ever hope for. On top of among the most visually striking recreations of nature ever seen, Eragon is something of a grown up Zelda fused with Lord of the Rings, awash with all manner of adventuring elements, dragon riding (in which your dragon Saphira rips and claws at enemies), evolving weaponry and spells, epic boss battles, and cinematic flair galore due to full cooperation from the film's production team. A stunning game awaits. **play**

"...this is one game that is getting the full next-gen treatment."



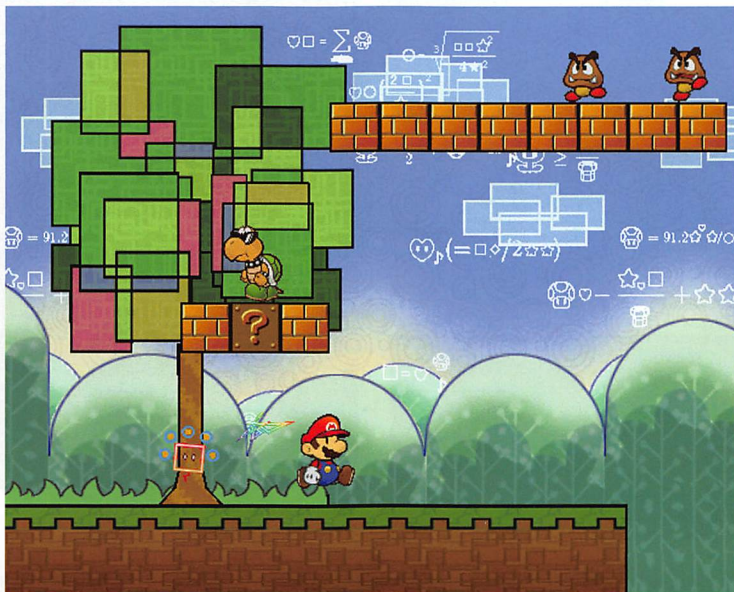
Super Paper Mario

Nothing thin about it

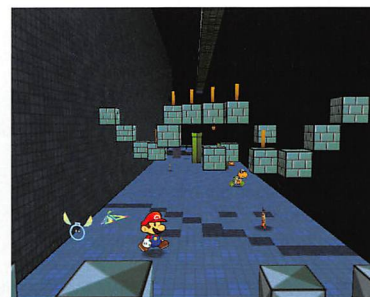
words Dave Halverson

di-o-ram-a. Three-dimensional miniature or life-size scenes in which figures, stuffed wildlife, or other objects are arranged in a naturalistic setting against a painted background.

I've always loved a good diorama, but none so much as the paper-thin promiscuity of Nintendo's Paper Mario series, which was the last thing I expected to see walking into Wii-3 this year, not to mention an all-new, 3D next-gen Mario (sly devils). All we have on the game so far is that it uses the always entertaining, seldom used 2D-into-3D gameplay integration, mixes platforming and RPG elements, features both Bowser and Peach as playable characters, and unfolds across eight worlds, slipping between dimensions filled with puzzles, mysteries, traps, and items that draw themselves out of thin air. Super Mario Bros., Super Mario Galaxy, and Super Paper, all in the same year....that's a lot of plumber's crack.



"...the last thing I expected to see walking into Wii-3 this year."



Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

Iga takes us back...

words Dave Halverson

I love Metroid-vania as much as the next vampire slayer, but I'd be lying if I said I was dying for yet another 2D castle crawl on DS. Bloodlines and IV being my favorite Castlevanias (after Symphony), I'd much rather see a Morris in the driver's seat and a more open 2D landscape, which is exactly what we're getting with Portrait, along with single-player character shuffling, shifting between Jonathan Morris and Charlotte Orlean on the fly. Jonathan uses a whip (pause for group "ahhh....") and Charlotte is a nimble little

witch that double jumps and floats down on a broom: Pure 2D magic. Set amongst the bleak backdrop of WWII, Portrait is the second best way I can think of to celebrate 20 years of Castlevania. And according to Iga, we haven't seen anything yet. He remains utterly bent on creating the ultimate next-gen 3D Castlevania before moving on to a next-gen side-scroller.

In the vein of Bloodlines, PoR is more quest oriented.



System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	Fall



"Portrait is the second best way I can think of to celebrate 20 years of Castlevania."

Final Fantasy XII

America is waiting...

words Eric Patterson

While the belles of the E3 ball may have been the sexy new next-gen systems, games like Final Fantasy XII showed why the PlayStation 2 is no where near ready for retirement. By far the most ambitious and thoroughly crafted Final Fantasy title to date, FFXII can easily make one forget about expensive new consoles when you see the graphical beauty, experience the richness of gameplay and characters, and fully realize the epic scope that Matsuno and company were able to craft here. Though this will be the last hurrah before the series moves on to the land of the Cell, everything that was accomplished with this game makes the mind reel at what could be next.

I know the wait is utterly painful, but come



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Square Enix	Available	Oct. 2006



October, the long days spent pining will all be worth it. The U.S. version looks to be coming together just fine, and the English voices—what little we got to hear of them—sounded like another quality dub. I almost regret spending time with this one at E3, thought, because it just makes October seem even farther away.



XII's three perfect 10s in Famitsu were well earned.

Guitar Hero

For those about to rock...

words Eric Patterson

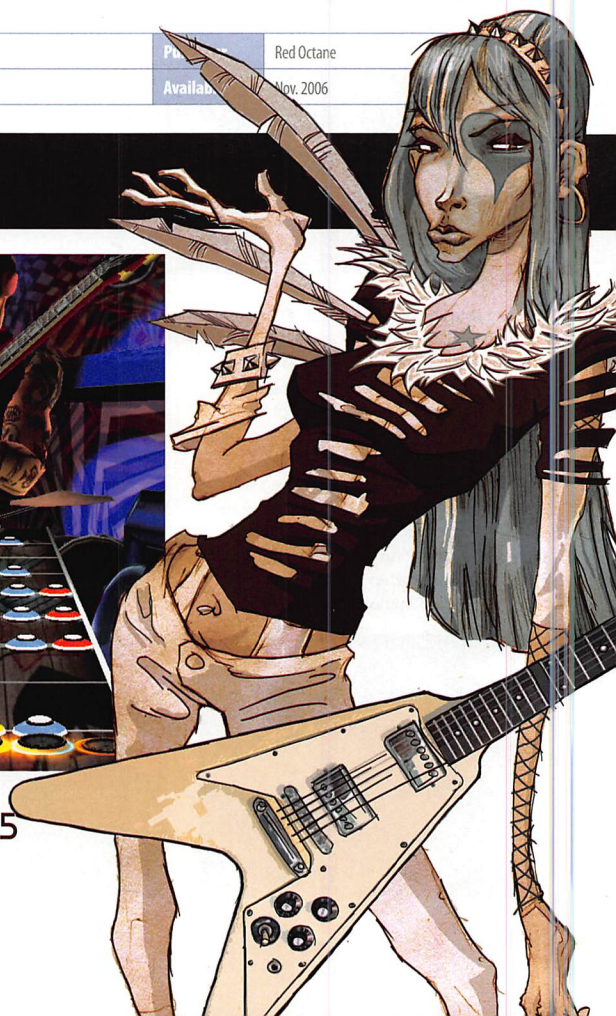
It should come as no surprise that last year's beloved sleeper hit would quickly get a sequel, and for Guitar Hero II, the dial is being turned up so far that even eleven will seem like Muzak. The single player career mode is back, but much more involving this time around, as you try to land endorsement deals in your struggle for stardom. Prefer rocking out with a friend? Multi-player now offers not only lead guitar, but also rhythm and bass options, letting two players work together on a song like an actual band. For those who mastered the original, the difficulty in GH2 has increased, including all new 3-button chords. Don't worry—you'll be able to pop into practice mode should things get too fast and furious.

But what about the music? At least 55 tracks are being planned: covers of songs from KISS, Black Sabbath, Butthole Surfers, Van Halen, Rush, and Reverend Horton Heat have already been announced, and Primus will even be remaking one of their own songs directly for the game. Of course, your old guitar will work... but how about giving us those color variation ones I saw at E3, guys? play



"But what about the music? At least 55 tracks are being planned..."

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Red Octane
Developer	Harmonix	Available	Nov. 2006



Phantasy Star Universe

Lose yourself again...

words Eric Patterson

Ah, Phantasy Star Online—how spectacularly you ruined my social life for countless months. Will Sega's newest entry in the series, Phantasy Star Universe, do the same? If what I played at E3 is any indication, then the answer is a resounding yes. If you spent many a day customizing your HUmor or RAcaseal, be prepared to get lost in a character creator that puts what we had before to utter shame. Once your perfect online persona is finished, jump into adventures that span three entire planets, as you (and up to five teammates) delve into all new quests, monsters, and locations, with a roster of new weapons and abilities to aid you.

Sure, us online addicts will have a lot to see and do, but those that prefer a

single-player experience won't be left out this time around, as PSU will also have totally beefed up solo gameplay. Taking up the role of a young lad named Ethan, you'll hack and slash your way through a fully developed and scripted 40+ hour storyline, instead of just the "online lite" mission quests from PSO. I swear, October, you're so far away!



System(s)	PS2, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	October



"Phantasy Star Online—how spectacularly you ruined my social life for countless months."



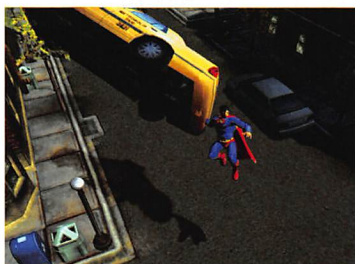
Justice League Heroes

Justice for all

words Dave Halverson

Comic book fans have been waiting a long time for a game that does polygonal justice to its penned and painted counterparts, and it has finally arrived. Behold a top-down action-adventure with as much emphasis on art and animation as any other aspect of the game—and this is one seriously cool game. JLH makes all those top-down X-Men games look like

so many animated dingle-berries. What's more is that not only can you play a single-player game with keen adjustable AI, but a friend can assume control or retire at any time during the game, uninterrupted. The gameplay itself is everything you'd expect coming from Snowblind Studios, and the story comes by way of the Emmy-winning writer, Dwayne McDuffie.



System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, PSP	Publisher	Warner Bros.
Developer	Snowblind Studios	Available	October



"JLH makes all those top-down X-Men games look like so many animated dingle-berries."



System(s)	PS2, Xbox 360, Xbox, PC, GameCube	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	Available	September

Splinter Cell Double Agent

Secret agent Sam

words Casey Lee

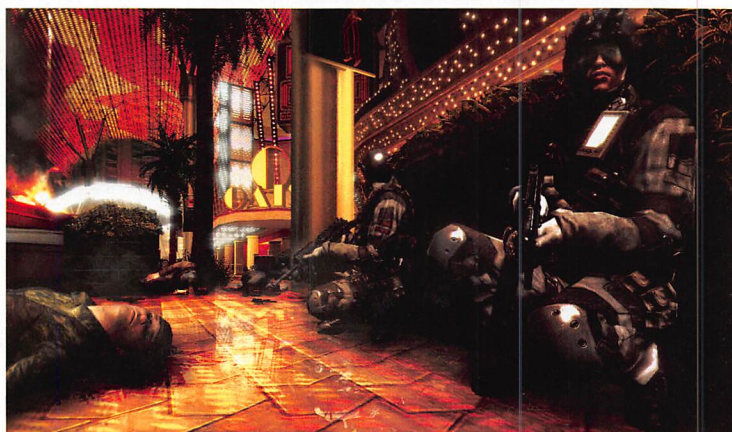
With *Splinter Cell Double Agent*, Ubisoft has once again broken new ground in the fields of both tactical espionage gaming and colon-free subtitling. Shedding the series' reputation for being as risk-averse as its shadow-lurking hero, *Double Agent* has stripped Sam Fisher of his fancy technology, dragged him into the harsh light of day, and forced him into a moral dilemma so difficult he's apt to wonder if he's still stuck in last year's *Metal Gear* teaser.

As the title implies, Sam has covertly joined a terrorist organization, where he will need to win the villains' trust while secretly undermining their goals. (It's kind of like the TV show *Alias*, except presumably Sam Fisher won't get pregnant halfway through and ruin the whole damn thing.) The story gives an unprecedented amount of freedom to the player, allowing you to sacrifice innocents to befriend the terrorists or save them and risk compromising long-term objectives. The decisions you make will be reflected

"...the Xbox 360 version allows Sam to effectively hide in the storms of particle dust kicked up by helicopters..."

in later missions and may have drastic consequences in the game's ending.

The game's 15 levels seem evenly split between high-tech suit-and-visor affairs and undercover missions in which Sam is armed with nothing but a pair of Ray-bans and his bone-dry wit. We saw impressive examples of both on the show floor: A traditional *Splinter Cell* mission had Sam parachuting onto a frozen lake, slipping beneath the ice to monitor the guards above, then pulling them through for a mess-free kill. As beautiful as the underwater scene was, the next mission



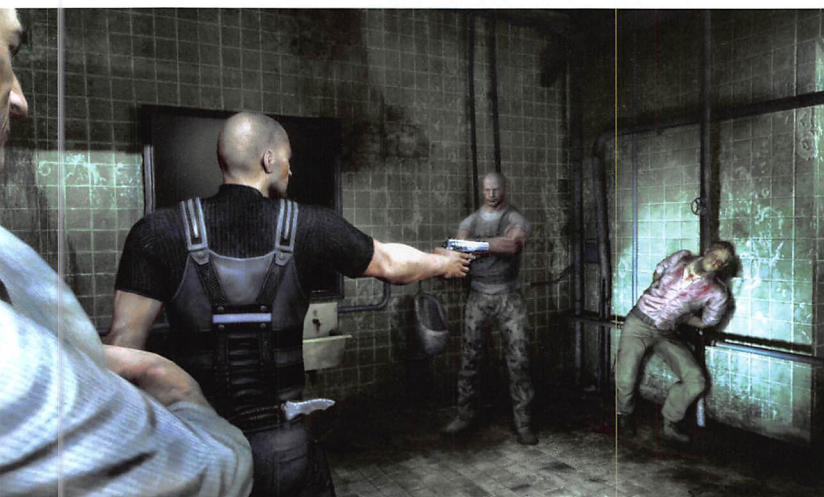
topped it with a fully recreated South American city that's vaster by far than anything we've ever seen in the series.

Unlike recent cross-platform releases like *Tomb Raider*, the Xbox 360 version of *Double Agent* isn't just a prettied-up version of a PS2 game. While all the versions of the game follow the same rough outline, the specific environments, mission objectives and even the play mechanics have been built to take full advantage of each platform's abilities.

For example, the Xbox 360 version allows Sam to effectively hide in the storms of particle dust kicked up by helicopters, and lighting tricks have been used to emulate the dilation of pupils when you step into blinding sunlight.

Ubisoft wasn't showing the lesser versions, but the 360 version of *Splinter Cell Double Agent* may stand as the system's most visually impressive title when it's released in September.

Live or die? The choice is ultimately yours.





Metroid Prime 3 Corruption

System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	Retro	Available	Launch

The game looks an awful lot like the last Metroid Prime, but that is not a bad thing. Metroid Prime 3 Corruption was one of the more intuitive Wii games on first go, with the basic action mixing well with the controller. I liked snapping back to reel in Samus' beam and open doors. Even if the technology is behind the other next-gen platforms, the game still looks great. *Brady Fiechter*

Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway



System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Gearbox	Available	Fall 2006

Take that, Adolf Hitler. In 1944, Allied forces attempted to put a quick end to World War II by punching a hole through the Netherlands straight into Berlin. Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway drops players into those fateful eight days, for a first-person shooter with as many brains as it has spilt guts. *Greg Orlando*



Coded Arms Assault

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	November 17

While the rest of the FPS kooks went gaga over a glut of body count simulators, Coded Arms Assault—which has you assuming the role of a hacker dropped in a virtual world to overthrow an evil corporation bent on real world domination—went somewhat unnoticed, although it was among the best looking PS3 games being shown as one of few fresh FPS games. *Dave Halverson*

Full Auto 2: Battlelines

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Pseudo Interactive	Available	Fall 2006

Defensive driving is for suckers. Full Auto 2: Battlelines brings car combat to the fore on PlayStation 3 with six multiplayer modes, more than 25 cars, and a world that fairly screams, "Go ahead! Wreck me!" And if you don't wreck it but good, you can expect to feel pangs of extreme guilt. We warned you. *Greg Orlando*

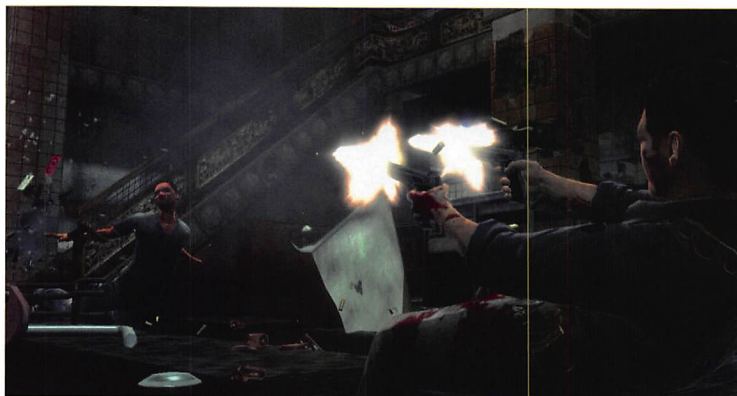


Eye of Judgment



System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SCEJ
Developer	SCEJ	Available	TBA

Now this is hot...maybe the coolest single "hook" at E3. The Eye of Judgment presents a new style of gameplay where the player brings fantasy trading card monsters to 3D life through the use of a 3' x 3' board, the Eye Toy, and trading cards. Nudge the card forward and well, see above. You can imagine the rest. Think this might catch on? *Dave Halverson*



John Woo Presents Stranglehold

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Midway
Developer	Midway	Available	2006

Film director John Woo's *Stranglehold* is shaping up to be a havoc simulator. There's a lot of games where everything blows up, but I don't know if there's a game out there where this much stuff blows up. You're a cop in the game, and as any good cop knows, you gotta be bad-ass; ease of play reveals immediate bad-ass results. *Brady Fiechter*

Rayman: Raving Rabbids



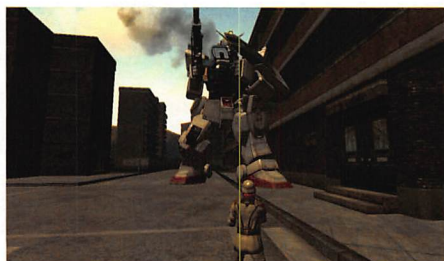
System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft (Team Angel)	Available	Q4

We didn't learn much about *Rayman: Raving Rabbids* at E3 other than the fact that Rayman doesn't always look like a Grateful Dead roadie, and that he and everything else in the game seem to be running from a terrifying militia of wide-eyed evil Rabbids. That and the fact that it's the best looking Wii game in the bunch ought to be enough. *Dave Halverson*

Mobile Ops: The One Year War

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Bandai Namco
Developer	Dimps	Available	TBA

Mobile Ops: The One Year War is shaping up to potentially be a Gundam fan's dream; battle on foot, jump into a mech, and then engage in either long-range or close quarters combat. Hop onto Xbox Live, and you can embed your plasma sword into other pilots from around the globe. *Eric Patterson*



Virtua Fighter 5

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sega	Available	Q2 2007

The technically impressive arcade hit *Virtua Fighter 5* will be making its way to the PS3, and Sega promises that all of the visual splendor and gameplay elements of the arcade version will remain intact. Also along for the ride, of course, will be new PS3-specific modes and features. *Eric Patterson*

Shadowrun

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft
Developer	FASA Interactive	Available	TBA

Shadowrun became a cult classic back on the Genesis, and the game returns, this time as a first-person shooter. Players take sides with either the Lineage or the Corporation, who battle for control over an ancient source of power. Traditional *Shadowrun* elements abound, as do interesting twists on traditional FPS gameplay. *Eric Patterson*



Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy



System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Midway
Developer	Midway	Available	Fall 2006

You can probably count the number of editors that care about *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy* on one hand with four missing digits. Hi. You want details? Well, it's an adventure/fighting game and it looks really good. Beyond that, tune in next month. That gives you plenty of time to dial it up Monday through Thursday at 8:00 P.M. (E/P) on CN. *Dave Halverson*

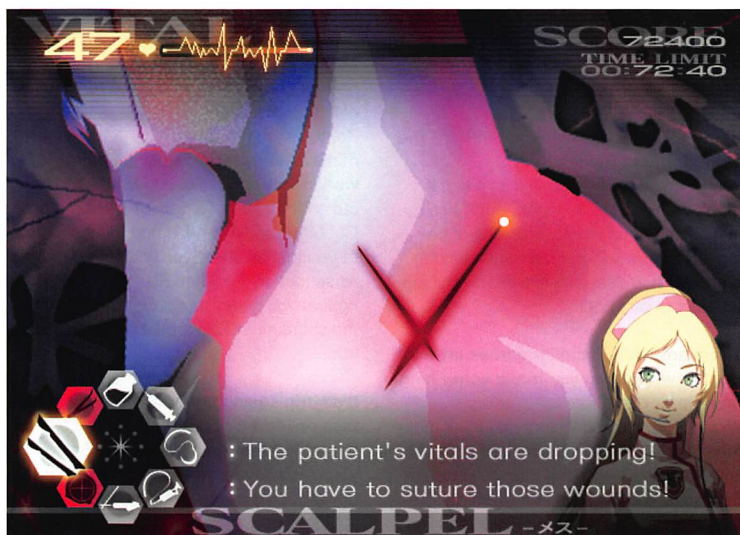


Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	High Impact Games	Available	Fall

The PSP can indeed do action-platforming: Dexter nailed it. Next up is Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters, which feels comfortably like the console series, borrowing a lot of the same mechanics and weapons-play. The scale has been diminished, but the game's looking great. *Brady Fiechter*

Trauma Center: Second Opinion



System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Atlus
Developer	Atlus	Available	LQ4

The surprise DS hit makes its way to the Wii, hopefully right in time for launch. Making full use of the Wii controller, Second Opinion will make you feel like you're right in the middle of the operating room, minus all the blood and malpractice suits. *Eric Patterson*

Metal Slug Anthology

System(s)	Wii	Publisher	SNK
Developer	SNK	Available	Q4

Yes, it's true: Metal Slug 1, 2, 3, X, 4, and 5 are all coming to the Wii, wrapped together in one disc of old-school shooter love. Using the Wii controller, you'll be able to play the games as never before, such as moving it to slash your knife or chuck grenades. *Eric Patterson*



Tokobot Plus: Mysteries of the Karakuri

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Tecmo
Developer	Tecmo	Available	Q3

We awarded Tokobot PSP game of the year for 2005. We're really smart. Now there's a sequel on PS2, with all-new combo attacks, an upgrade system, the ability to absorb enemies' attacks, and more of everything else that made the first Karakuri expedition so groovy--courtesy of the energizer bunny of consoles, the PS2. *Dave Halverson*

Brooktown High: Senior Year

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Backbone Entertainment	Available	Spring 2007

I finally know why those cheeky monkeys at Backbone kept me away from their weird cubicle/shrine while I was checking out DJ. Maybe you think dating sims are shite, I know I did, but this one is uber-cool, and really bouncy! Now you can enjoy all the fun of spring break without all the annoying vaccines! *Dave Halverson*



Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	TBA

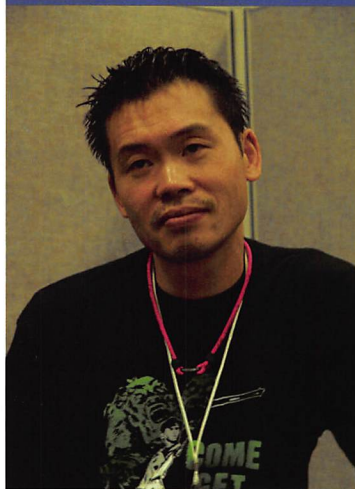
Portable Ops offers an all-new single-player adventure set after the events of Metal Gear Solid 3, and lets players recruit their very own squad of warriors to use in multiplayer competitions. For those keeping score, the pretty-looking Ops is the first 3D action Gear game to make it to the PSP. *Greg Orlando*

Keiji Inafune

Capcom stalwart

by Brady Fiechter

Famous for the classic Mega Man series, Inafune now goes Xbox 360.



+ Lost Planet Dead Rising

play: Ben said it'd be OK to challenge you to an arm wrestling match to wake you up. You look very tired.

Keiji Inafune: [laughs] You might crush me.

What project has been your favorite to work on?

It's strange, because the titles I think of are not the ones that have not done well. In Japan, we have this cultural reference that says, there's nothing quite as beautiful as an ugly child. So we sort of appreciate things that don't do well because you can learn a lot from it. It's sort of sad that it's not appreciated for what it should be. But if I did have to say one series, it'd be Mega Man Legends. That was one I really enjoyed working on.

Everyone's scrambling right now to figure out what's actually going to sell. It's tough right now, huh? Especially if you're concerned with making something you really believe in more than what you imagine will sell and support your company.

You're very right. What you say is the truth. Probably the most difficult problem we as creators face, everyone in the industry needs to worry about, is the balance. The perfect sweet spot, what needs to be made. We're in a period now where a game like Brain Age is very cheap to make but sells like crazy. Does that mean you're guaranteed to make a game like that and have it sell like crazy? No way. Does

that mean you spend a ton of money and make a triple-A title and it's gonna sell. Not necessarily. And now when we're on this next generation, and costs just seem to be exploding, you're gonna see games that cost 30, 40 million, and the risks just get larger and larger. So it's becoming more than just the talent of the creators keeping the companies afloat. It's also the people making the economic decisions within the company.

I guess as a creator there has to be some excitement around all this.

Yeah, I mean, if you were to be given a ridiculously high amount of money, money was no object and you could make the game you wanted to make. Sure, that could be fun. But having no limits like that is in a way of sorts a very narcissistic style of making games. You look at the Yankees, they have so much money to spend to get all the best players and when they win, while it may feel like a win, it feels like an empty win. If you're a team that doesn't have that much money and uses team work and comes up with something really great, and then are able to succeed... the sense of accomplishment for a project like that is going to be very different. It's nice to know that there are going to be different levels and degrees of accomplishment, different styles of games.

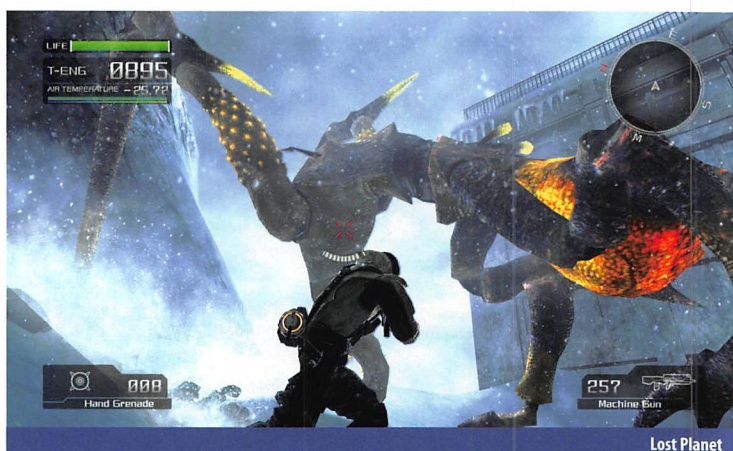
Looking at Lost Planet, what would you point to as an important accomplishment?

It's a very interesting question. If I had to point to one thing that makes it unique or great it's the fact that it's a third-person shooter. So you're probably saying, "it's the genre that makes this so special?" It is, because the Xbox 360 is hardware we knew was not going to do great in Japan. When we designed the game, we had to base it on America and Europe, what would do well there. When you do this, you can go with different ideas that Japanese players might not normally like. If this was a PlayStation 3 game, the company probably wouldn't have supported this decision. The PlayStation 3 probably will sell in Japan, so you have to keep those sensibilities more in mind. So just being an Xbox 360 allowed us to do things we might normally not get to do.

I like your shirt. You obviously love American horror movies.

Yeah, I love B-horror movies. And it's like you said, having unlimited budgets, etc, is great and you can make the Brukheimer movies of the world and have all the explosions and actors you want. But having limits in resources makes people have to think around with creative answers and creative solutions to certain problems. Designing games for the original Nintendo was like that, you had such small memory that to try and make a game out of that meant you were always challenging yourself. Trying to think of new ways you could utilize the system. That's what a B movie sort of feels like. One of my favorite direc-

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom	Available	2006



"So we sort of appreciate things that don't do well because you can learn a lot from it..."

tors is John Carpenter just because with less money than most people he was able to create these very deep worlds that were great experiences.

It's safe to say you were inspired by The Thing for Lost Planet.

Yeah, I loved it when I saw it as a kid. It didn't do well at all in Japan, but it's still just such a good movie. The idea of being locked away in a frozen wasteland and having to deal with this shape shifting monster is very cool.

There are a lot of similar games around right now. How do you make something more important?

Already Japanese developers, I think more than their American counterparts, place a large emphasis on story. Even in Resident Evil, there is a clear cut story, getting to the bottom of the mystery. There is a nice amount of creating atmosphere and character. But even that is not enough for the next-generation. We really need to concentrate on atmosphere and story that put your right there in the moment. No longer

are we in a place, hopefully, where you can just sit there and hammer away on buttons and just blow away people left and right.

And now we're faced with paying 600 dollars for these experiences.

Yeah, that's pretty damn expensive. And for a 3rd party software house, you need the hardware to sell in order to make money. So when I saw how expensive it's going to be, it kind of reeled me back.

Let's shift gears to Dead Rising. What makes zombies such a great force of evil in games?

Zombies are fun. There's something that makes them special within the horror world. They can make you laugh. You can cut off the head of a human and it's gross. Cut off a zombie's head and there's a part of you that laughs. Even when it's a game as serious as Resident Evil, it's coming right at you going "uuuhhh," and you take the shotgun and blow off its head, it's just fun.

It's a trip seeing so many of these zombies onscreen at once.

I'm really happy with the results. Before, you could have enemies surrounding you, but with this, you have ten surrounding you, knowing there could be a hundred behind them. So even if you do get away from those ten, you're constantly in trouble. You're just always in deep shit. That tension we wanted to create before but just couldn't. **play**



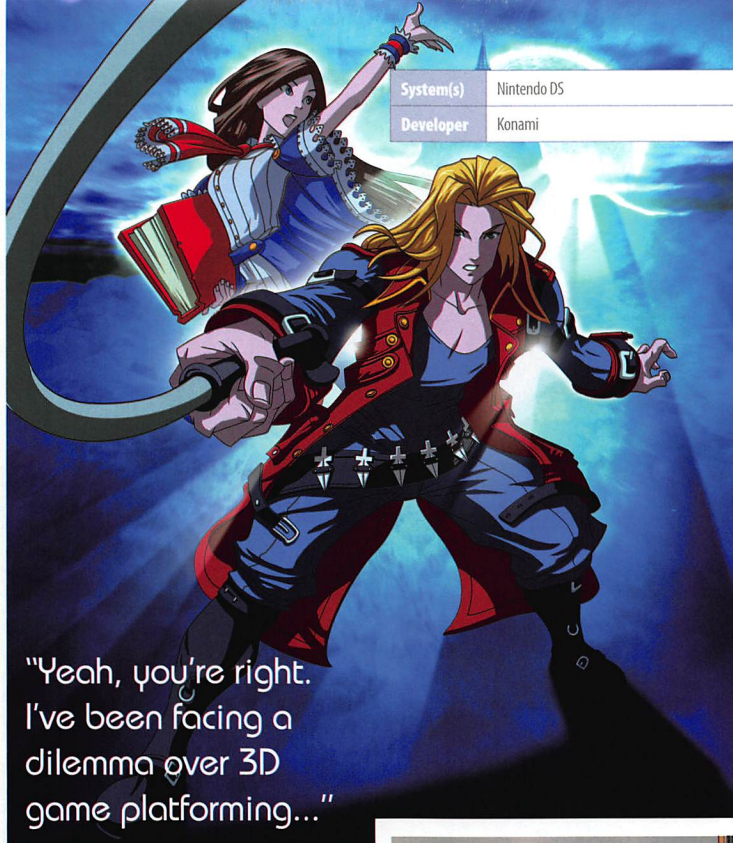
Dead Rising

Koji Igarashi

Director, Castlevania

by Play staff

In need of another 2D Castlevania? The DS continues the love, thanks to long-time creator Koji Igarashi.



"Yeah, you're right. I've been facing a dilemma over 3D game platforming..."

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	2006

Do you ever considering completely changing the structure of Castlevania?

I'm always thinking to make a drastic change. But I know that fans love action games. I guess to a certain point I need to make changes, but I have to fulfill the needs of fans. But at a certain point in the near future, I will have to consider redesigning the game.

Did you begin this project by saying, let's make a second DS game, or did you start with the mechanics and then pick a platform?

Yes, we knew it would be a DS game from the start. Dawn of Sorrow was a successful product, so we wanted to take the challenge of making the next game even better.

Will there be any touch screen functionality?

The DS hardware, it's been almost two years since the launch. I felt like you didn't really need to focus on the touch paddle. One of the reasons I didn't focus on it this time was that ... I'm not saying that my magic seal system was bad, but what I realized was that it distracted from the playability, and I didn't want that this time. When I was playing and defeating enemies, when I'd go in for the final kill with the magic seal, I'd have to use my finger. My screen got really messed up! But I do love the dual screen, and with the menus we have incorporated the touch screen.

What do you like about the DS?

From a design perspective, we're actually hand drawing all these pieces for Portrait of Ruin, and not many designers are currently working on that kind of stuff for the next generation. It's pretty valuable. A lot of heart is in it. They're actually hand drawing, it's like they're hand crafting the game. Compared to over-the-top qualities of next-gen, the DS still has a warmth, and I love those visuals. **play**

Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

The lineage continues

play: Thank you for the whip; they sent us Castlevania whips.

Koji Igarashi: With Lament of Innocence, I had that whip around with me so many times that Konami US PR copied it. I got really good with it.

Do you use your whip around the house?

Mainly in the office. Actually, I've gotten whipped by my wife.

We were actually wondering about that. [laughs] I'm always whipped by my wife.

But seriously, how do you stay on course with Castlevania. You've been doing these games for a long time. One of the motivations for me is that I hear a lot of people saying how excited they are for Castlevania. That's really what moves me to work on the next project.

The one question I ask every year, vital to the industry! We need a 2D Castlevania on next-gen console. I've been thinking, trying to simulate various forms of Castlevania on next generation. I do understand that fans love 2D. I've worked on 3D platforms twice already, but I'm not really happy about my work. And as you know, I don't want to lose. I want to be challenged. But no matter what platform it is, I will tell you that I will always continue to work on 2D games.

I can see why you haven't been that

thrilled with the 3D games so far; they have been a lot more battlebased than platforming. And with Symphony and the earlier Bloodlines games, there was more platforming and swinging with the whip and stuff like that. **Are those the types of things you might incorporate more into a next-gen 3D Castlevania?** Yeah, you're right. I've been facing a dilemma over 3D game platforming... obviously I've done two projects already and I know something is wrong. I have certain ideas in my head, but we're not up to the stage of expressing that in the game. That's something I'm not happy with and really want to meet the challenge.

Has your team been experimenting with the Wii controller?

I actually have, and from that experience I've noticed that Castlevania might not fit the controller. Wii is targeting some short gameplay, whereas Castlevania is a longer game. Once you get into the game you've been playing for so many hours it doesn't really fit with Wii.

Is your fan base as big in Japan?

Definitely bigger in the US. I know there are many fans in US, but in my development, I don't care who they are, anything that is fun to me and my team members will work. It's obvious that creating some boring games from our end, we can't be confident providing such games.



Takashi Tezuka



The man behind the newest Mario

by Brady Fiechter

By now you're playing the wonderful New Super Mario Bros. Now read about the process behind the game's creation...



NEW Super Mario Bros.

Takashi Tezuka, project manager

play: What is it that makes Mario appealing to so many people?

Takashi Tezuka: To be honest with you, I don't find the Mario character to be that charming. But that being said, place him in these games that are a great amount of fun, and people start to equivocate that sense of joy they get from playing with the Mario character.

There's a little kid that comes out of you when you play.

Yeah, and recently with the inclusion of voice in games and with Mario's distinctive "wahoos" takes it to a new level as well.

As the creator of Mario, someone who was there from the beginning, what is it about the game that is so good?

Well, one of the things... you look at how many games have come out with Mario as a character, outside his starring role, we've been very strict in checking quality. Not only the sound, the images and the game-play, but just everything you can imagine across the board. We just hold these games to the highest standard.

Would you consider yourself a perfectionist?

No no... I'm just rough. And when we give someone the opportunity outside our company to work with Mario, I'm a hard-ass.

So Mario is quite important to you, you hold him close to your heart?

Yes... and working on the New Super Mario Bros on DS, we brought in a lot of new, young faces to work on the game, and all of these individuals had their own idea of who Mario is, what he should be doing. Trying to unify all that and bring it all together was pretty tough.

Playing New Super Mario Bros, you get a sense that there's a spirit of all the Marios in the game. Maybe that's because you had so many people design the game inspired by their personal favorites from the past.

Yeah, you're exactly right. These were all people who grew up playing Mario, and they all had their own ideas of what he

"I think the younger staff members, they wanted to make Mario more super..."

Takashi Tezuka, New Super Mario Bros.

should be.

I had lunch a while back with Reggie Fils-Aime, and he posed the question: how would we see the approach of marketing a New Super Mario Bros. It's interesting, because gamers are such a broad bunch and expectations aren't what they used to be.

Nintendo says this all the time, and it's so true. Every time I go there, I see this with all these people, they're in there making games that they honestly believe people from age 5 to 105 are gonna play. They're never focused on a specific group. And you ask, how do you market that? I can only really tell you about some of what we did in Japan for New Super Mario Bros.



System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Nintendo
Developer	Nintendo	Available	Now



The original Super Mario Bros. was in a yellow box. All DS cases are black. In this case, we made it yellow, in hopes that people would say, "hey, this is really special." And for those who haven't played it, they're gonna ask why it's so different. With the illustrations and everything, we really wanted to re-create that vibe you got from the first time you saw Super Mario Bros. In America, they wanted to showcase more of the new features, like giant Mario and micro Mario. In Japan, we just wanted it to be pure and simple. And we didn't want to come across so different that it would

scare people off. I very much understand the need to approach different markets in different ways, and I have no problem with it. I just thought it was really interesting to see the difference.

Now we've got 600 dollar systems on the way, all this fancy technology and drive for new, complex experiences. When you first sat down and decided you wanted to make another Mario, were you tempted to really change things, or was there always the desire to stay true to the roots?

You know, I really wanted to re-create my own personal experience when I was making the first Mario Bros. Of course, there are a lot of things we incorporated into the game that just couldn't have been done back then. So basically we wanted to take that old-school vibe and marry it with a lot of the new-school technology.

You say you want to go back to that first experience of making Mario. How do you keep yourself fresh and motivated through the years?

That's tough to answer. I never really think about it, I don't really do anything. What I really concentrated on, what I really implored by staff to do was pare away any excess, anything that didn't belong. We just wanted to make the courses fun, and anything that didn't do that we had to get rid of. I think the younger staff members, they wanted to make Mario more super—stronger, faster, jump higher, do all of these things. And once that happened, the traditional enemies, the koopas, the goombas, all these guys aren't gonna stand up to this new and improved super Mario. Let's increase the number of enemies, let's make stronger enemies, let's do this and that. I just saw all this lead to an overcomplication. So just said, "stop, that's enough." It just didn't need to get to that level. I think that, how you said, purity there, is definitely a product of my technique and my idea of what Mario is.

Tell me something interesting about the design process.

There were only four designers for all the courses. Three of them were brand new employees. Mr. Nagano, who was the original course designer, a little bit older than me, has been around in all the Mario games. He was kind of the shepherd, leading these other guys through the wilderness. He was working so hard on all this, he had to get bifocals [laughs.] play



Tomonobu Itagaki

DoA man

by Greg Orlando

Beer has been brought into a small room in Tecmo's booth on the E3 show floor. Tomonobu Itagaki, maker of the Dead or Alive fighting game series, immediately perks up. It is as if a can of spinach has dropped into Popeye's lap; all is right with the world.

Before the beer, Itagaki seemed worn, tired. His trademark sunglasses can't hide the fatigue on his face. It's been a nonstop blur promoting his new game Dead or Alive Xtreme during E3—and then assaulting Los Angeles proper after it.

Properly fueled, Itagaki and his translator, Tecmo's John Inada (who'd been using the private room for a quick nap), fire it up for one more interview about Xtreme, its rodent infestation, and the mysterious "God Hand" game system its creator loves to not talk about.



Dead or Alive Xtreme 2

Itagaki, to the Xtreme

play: When last we left off in Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball, Zack had been eaten by a shark and his island destroyed. Where does the game pick up?

Tomonobu Itagaki: Of course, Zack didn't disappoint his fans. He found a way to bring the island back.

[Discussion ensues between Itagaki and translator John Inada.]

Actually, fans of the girls [found a way]. Of course, I am sure everyone wants to see the girls on the islands again, right?

Why shift the game's focus away from volleyball and onto jetski racing?

Isn't it better to have more activities and games in [Dead or Alive Xtreme 2]? Of course, the beach volleyball portion, too, will be better. We're going to brush up on that, as well.

Can you elaborate on how you're going to improve the beach volleyball?

The previous game, it was more defensive play. We want to make it more offensive, more aggressive, more competitive, and combative. We also want to up the tempo a little bit.

Also, the visual gratification of seeing the girls play will be improved.

Do you have other specific criticisms

about Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball?

I think the beach volleyball portion was a little sluggish.

This project was a bit of a hobby for me. I'm just going to say honestly, but I think maybe I was focusing on the wrong area. This time, the game is going to be even more fun.

The other day I played with a real good player of DOAX 1. And I felt the game was too sluggish. If you're a better gamer, it's more annoying that it takes too much time to get through [a match]. I want to fix all those things that I've noticed and make it a more aggressive game.

Tell us all about Xtreme's new minigames. Omit no Earthly detail.

The poolside games are so sexy that if you see them enough times, you might faint. [Laughter] When you see it, you won't be able to fight the temptation of wanting to play with the girls.

You'll be able to experience the beach flag game, and it's so beautiful and so impressive that you'll be dreaming about it. Then, of course, there's casino [games], and casino is a very manly game—it's like sex and casino. They go hand-in-hand; there'll be a gorgeous casino on the island.

The jetski is in such a dreamy environment. The jetski portion is a hardcore

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Tecmo
Developer	Team Ninja	Available	TBA

"The other day I played with a real good player of DOAX 1. And I felt the game was too sluggish."

Tomonobu Itagaki Interview

jetski game. ["Violent," Itagaki interjects, in English] It's rather violent, the jetski, that is. But it still remains sexy.

What about the game's soundtrack?

I've already selected all the songs, and they're all very soothing, very fitting for the game. There are some songs that will make you laugh a little.

Inquiring minds want to know. Will the rodent from recent Dead or Alive games make a return in Xtreme 2?

I've almost forgotten about that, but I think it will reappear again. Its name is Tina-chan.

Will we finally find out what God Hand is?

Of course the God hand system will be implemented, but I don't plan to reveal what it is until I die. I think it's going to be called Super God Hand this time around.

Is Dead or Alive Xtreme 2 the game codenamed Dead or Alive: Code Chronus? Or are they two separate titles?

They're two different titles. I'm continuing to work on Code Chronus—it's a story of Ayane and Kasumi. It tells the story of how Ayane and Kasumi became the great ninja that they are. **play**



Benjamin "BJ" Cholewinski and friends...

Return of the worm...

by Dave Halverson

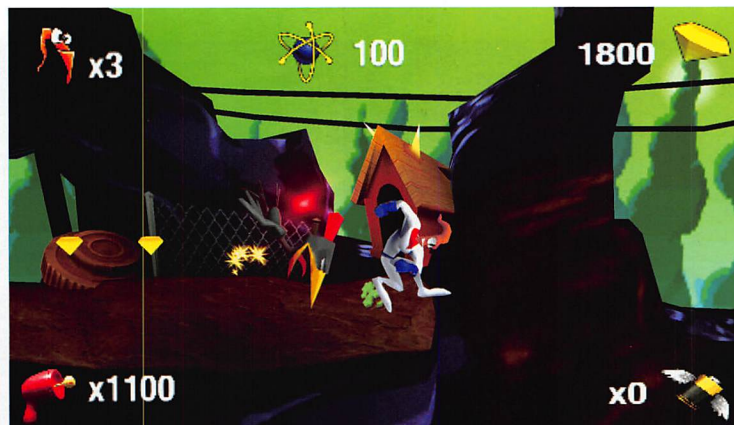
Months before bidding a fond farewell to the studio he started from scratch, David Perry divulged to me (on satellite phone from the middle of the Pacific no less) his plans to re-introduce Earthworm Jim via an all-new 2D hand-drawn PSP version using the core team of Mike Dietz, Nick Bruty and Doug TenNapel. So happy I'd have died of alcohol poisoning (if I drank) I managed to keep it a secret (okay, so I told Brady) until that fateful day when the ca-ca met the proverbial fan, after which I presumed the project, Jim, and perhaps even Shiny (a place where I spent much of my early days as a fledgling journalist) were toast. So you can imagine my jubilation when the game emerged at E3, along with a newly invigorated Shiny! Groovy! The new EWJ team has opted for side-scrolling 3D (like the new Ghosts 'n Goblins) over hand-drawn, but it's every inch pure Jim, only new, and—as evidenced by a mere 4 months of development—perhaps even

Earthworm Jim

Shiny and new!

play: The original EWJ was renowned for its ultra-responsive control and fluid 2D animation. Can you capture the same magic using polys?

BJ: No doubt. A primary goal of ours is getting Jim fluid and responsive. We have only been in development for a few months at this point, but so far Jim is feeling pretty responsive and our experiments with squash and stretch animation is proving successful. Can 3D poly-man lay waste to 2D animated man? Personally, I'd have to say no. With pen in hand you are not limited by the rules of engine tech. Fun animations like pants falling down, eyes popping out, etc. require a lot more tech, people and time to pull off in 3D. But that kind of thinking isn't going to stop us from trying to get close to O.G. Jim. And of course some 3D animations may work better than 2D. You win some, you lose some.



"And my favorite, less meetings and more work! Work is good. Work is fun! Regarding Wild 9, 'I'm all... power up!'"

Jim Producer "BJ" Cholewinski

Explain how you're using Matrix Technology in a 2D space and what advantages that affords you.

The first advantage that springs to mind is being able to tack slick placeholder actions/animations on to Jim in order to get him running, jumping and fighting quickly in a test-only playground environment. From day one we were tuning his range of motion and response time. Let's ask Scott (our lead programmer) what he thinks.

Scott: Our tools and technology have been developed over several years of daily use. This gives us an incredible amount of existing power to leverage and has aided us in getting the game up and running in a fairly short time. The animation system, for example, has been developed to the point where the animators were able to construct the core character traversal mechanics without much in the way of programmer support.

From a programmer's perspective, having an existing, multiplatform engine allows us to focus on the systems that make EWJ special without having to reinvent the wheel. We can dive right in from day one and make Jim come to life.

The New Junk City stuff I saw at E3 seemed somewhat homage, only with added moves. Does this mean we'll see Snot a Problem!, What the Heck?, etc.? Might any EWJ 2 levels make the cut?

You are correct. New Junk City is homage to the original. All other gameplay stages are original in theme and layout but will draw inspiration from the greats.

Can you go into some detail and what fans can expect in terms of new moves and devices?

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Atari
Developer	Shiny Ent.	Available	Q1 '07

rest of team, they're a bunch of animated, passionate, misfit, clown, fire-dancing, wormhole-watching, rage-building, single, married (some with children – aak!), pet-owning, flatulent, workaholic, borderline insane, absolute nightmare and pleasure to work with kind of folk who all enjoy the license deeply.

Is Queen Pulsating, Bloated, Festering, Sweaty, Pus-filled, Malformed, Slug-for-a-Butt still sloshing around?

You bet.

How about Pyscrow, Peter Puppy and the rest of Jim's pals?

Wouldn't be Jim without 'em!

Do you launch a cow?

Over and over and over and...

So describe the new Shiny. Is it back to basics? Making fun games that don't cost 10-million and require tomes of instructions to wrangle...If so, I demand you begin work on Wild 9 2 next. Talk about a game with potential!

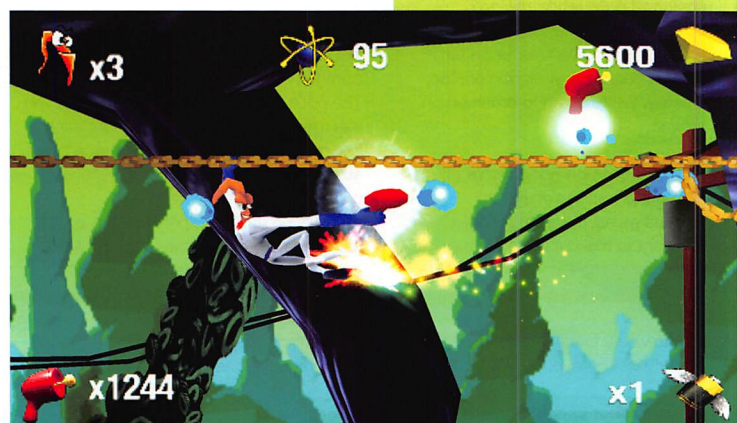
New Shiny = great times and bright future. Every man, woman and child has real ownership in our products and each individual contribution matters so much. No middlemen. Our scheduling and task-tracking is greatly improved. And my favorite, less meetings and more work! Work is good. Work is fun! Regarding Wild 9, "I'm all... power up!"

Well, with great power comes great responsibility and the world needs Jim now more than ever. We need the TV series on DVD and we need many next-gen sequels. Please do your best.

Agreed. It's a privilege and honor to be a part of this project and our team humbly thanks the powers that be for giving us this opportunity to shine. P.S. We can certainly feel the pressure and peeping eyes all over us and if they get any closer we're gonna lick 'em like this – "Shluuurp!"

To make a great Jim game you and the team must be somewhat bent. How have you gotten into the mindset of EWJ debauchery?

BJ: All my life my family and friends referred to me as "weird." Sometimes they said it to my face or worse, my Mom. I'll never forget the day my own mother called me weird. So I'm the weird guy. What can I say? I'm a product of video games, Japanese imports, transforming robots, gummy candy, cable TV, and Mr. Bungle. As for the



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Hideo Kojima

by Casey Loe



Metal Gear Solid 4

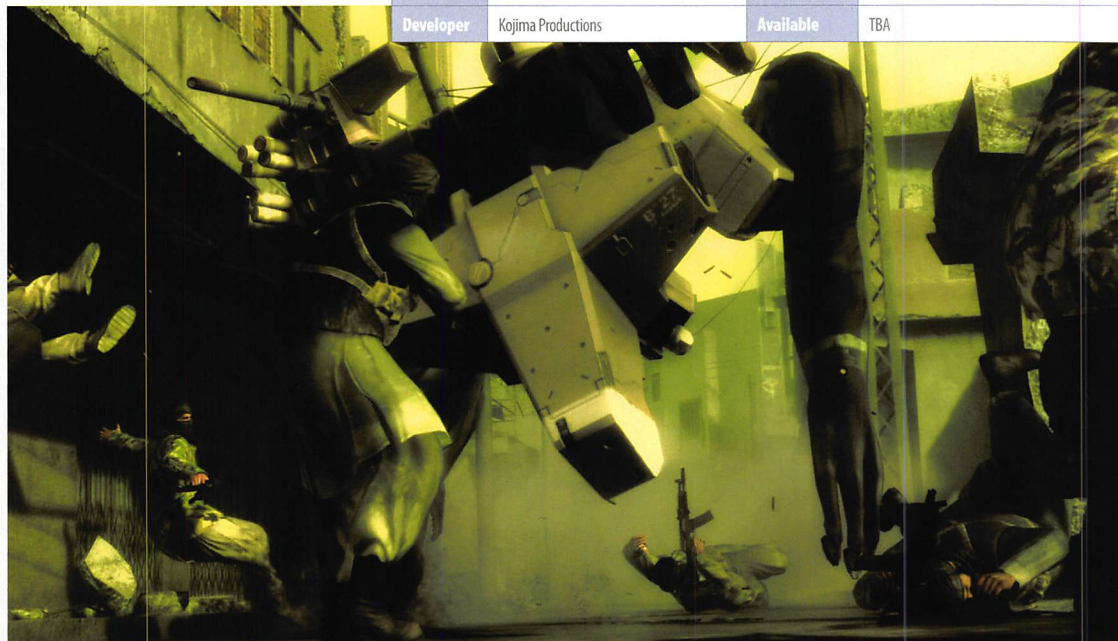
Guns of the Patriots

Old Snake: New tricks?

While the two new Metal Gear Solid 4 trailers unveiled at this year's E3 were cinematic masterpieces that cruelly teased every aspect of the story, neither gave viewers much insight into how the actual game will play. Fortunately, Hideo Kojima kindly gave us a few minutes of time to explain what would go on between those gorgeous cut scenes.

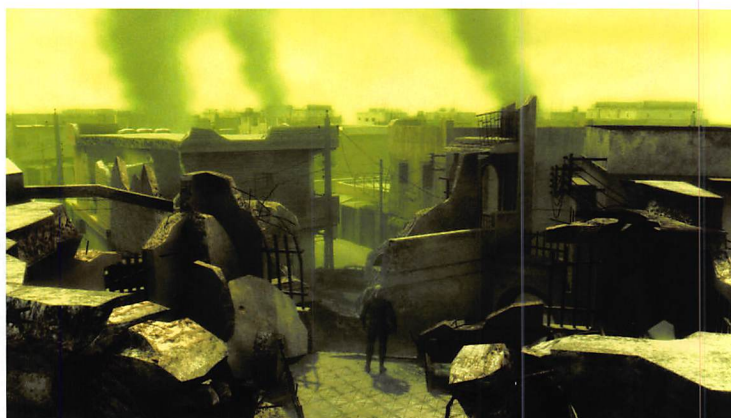
The extended trailer showed one new mechanic in action—a camouflage system so advanced it could mimic the bullet holes in the wall behind Snake. It's called the Octocam camouflage system, and it's a massive step up from the tactics employed in Metal Gear Solid 3. While that game's camouflage system was modeled after the color-shifting abilities of the chameleon, Kojima found new inspiration with the so-called "ninja of the sea," better known as the humble octopus. It can emulate not just color, but texture, and in a devastated world with few places to hide, the ability to lie flat on the ground and blend into your environment will be a key survival skill.

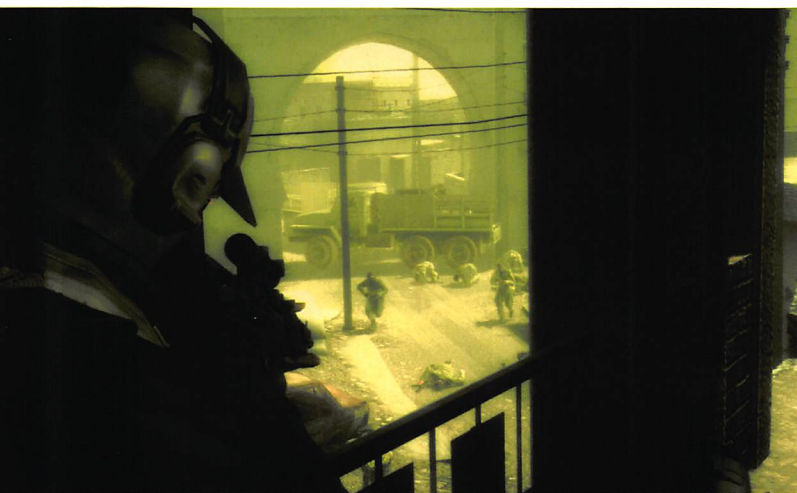
System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Kojima Productions	Available	TBA



"As a third party with his own agenda on the battlefield, Snake must use the conflict to his advantage or risk being caught in the crossfire."

But the Octocam is only one of a number of tactics Snake can employ in Metal Gear Solid 4's long-promised battlefield environment. "While other games [in the series] have been based around a place such as Alaska or New York, Metal Gear Solid 4 is based around a situation," explained Kojima. That situation is a war between two competing armies, neither of which is allied with Snake. As a third party with his own agenda on the battlefield, Snake must use the conflict to his advantage or risk being caught in the crossfire. For example, if Army A seems to be on the verge of winning a battle, Snake could disguise himself as a member of their army and





"Is Metal Gear Solid 4 going to be unbelievably depressing?"

shoot members of Army B while in sight of Army A soldiers. Having chosen the winning side, Snake will be able to move freely through the areas controlled by Army A. Of course, there's nothing to stop you from walking in with guns blazing and killing everyone on both sides of the conflict, but clever players can assess battlefield conditions and exploit them to make their missions easier.

While all the footage so far has taken place in the Middle East, the war will span many nations, and Snake's quest—whatever that may be—will go right along with it. So expect to visit a wider variety of locations than in past games. Finally, while nearly every surviving character in the series is expected to return, Kojima has confirmed that Snake will be the only playable character. So tough luck to

everyone who is jumping on the Raiden bandwagon now—you had your chance!

When asked about multi-player options, Kojima answered that the "Metal Gear Online" project that began with Subsistence is continuing, but its status in regards to Metal Gear Solid 4 has yet to be determined. The next online Metal Gear game may be a standalone product.

Finally, after repeatedly viewing a trailer that ended with our hero putting a gun in his mouth, we had to ask: Is Metal Gear Solid 4 going to be unbelievably depressing? But Kojima quickly promised that Guns of the Patriots will feature the same range of emotions as Metal Gear Solid 3... A range that, as we recall, ran from mildly depressing to horrifically depressing. "But with moments of humor," Kojima noted.

Just What The Heck Is Going On In This Game?

story analysis Nick Des Barres

The stunning, 15-minute long, 100% realtime E3 MGS4 trailer provided us with our first real glimpse of the game's storyline, and indeed director Hideo Kojima has said that unlike last year's TGS demo, every scene in this new presentation is culled from the actual game itself. So just what the heck is going on, then?

Solid Snake -- who Kojima jokes has lost the "S" and "I" from his name and is now known as "Old Snake" -- has undergone rapid premature aging due to the length of his telomeres being shorter than a natural-born human. Though he is still only 43 years old, returning character Naomi Hunter states he has but six months left to live. His twin clone brother Liquid Snake, however, has avoided the same fate by taking control of Revolver Ocelot's natural-born body. Liquid, now known as Liquid Ocelot (though Kojima states Ocelot's mind has now been almost entirely taken over by Liquid's consciousness), has spent the last several years since the Big Shell Incident of MGS2 taking control of the five largest PMCs, or Privatized Military Companies, suppliers for all the world's proxy wars, to achieve his ultimate goal: The re-establishment of his "father's" ideal, a country created by soldiers for soldiers -- Outer Heaven.

Snow's final mission is clear. He must

travel to the Middle East and defeat Liquid once and for all, lest the entire world be consumed in the fires of war. Then, he must eliminate every remaining trace of Big Boss' cursed DNA...including his own. The trailer practically hammers down the viewer's throat the notion that this is it -- Solid Snake is going to die. There's even a recurring scene in which Snake has a pistol in his mouth, ready to pull the trigger and end it all. Kojima has previously stated that Snake *isn't* going to die in MGS4, though with Naomi's statement that he has six months left to live, along with Snake's frequent ruminations to the effect of "some bloodlines must come to an end," it's looking awful unlikely our favorite gaming badass is making it out alive.

Several fan favorite characters make their first (re)appearance in this trailer, including an aged and retired Roy Campbell, the aforementioned Naomi Hunter who seems to explain her presence by saying that "we must all atone for our sins", perhaps in reference to her deliberate infection of Snake with the FOXDIE virus, and Campbell's niece Meryl Silverburgh, who announces that she is part of "the new FOXHOUND." Raiden makes a spectacular return in a three-minute sequence at the end of the trailer that truly must be seen to be believed, single-handedly destroying a platoon of Metal Gear GEKKO with nothing but a single High-Frequency Blade and a tanto dagger: "Snake...now it's my turn to protect you." Kojima seems determined to establish Raiden as a true hero, perhaps to leave him available for future Metal Gear sequels to be directed by his protegee, Shuyou Murata...and if this dazzling sequence is any indication, *my oh my* has he succeeded. Vamp, a baby cradled by Raiden (his child with Rosemary? Olga's child?), and Big Boss, who were first shown in promotional art released at E3 2005, have yet to be shown, as does Mei Ling, who voice actress Houko Kuwashima has confirmed is returning in MGS4.

Though the new trailer is revealing, several key questions remain unanswered (who the hell are the Patriots?!), and it even raises new ones: Where is Metal Gear MkII, and where is the Solid Eye System Snake was sporting in the original trailer? Have they been scrapped, or has Snake simply not acquired them yet at this point in the story?

And what's up with the new logo, by the way, with the two "L"s and "4" looking like nothing so much as inverted "7"s? Metal Gear was originally released for the MSX in July, 1987. This obviously makes the 20th anniversary of Metal Gear July, 2007. Does this mean anything? Am I looking too hard for clues that aren't there? Or...might MGS4 be released on the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of the new millennium -- 7/7/07? At this point, only Kojima knows for sure.

"Kojima has previously stated that Snake isn't going to die in MGS4..."



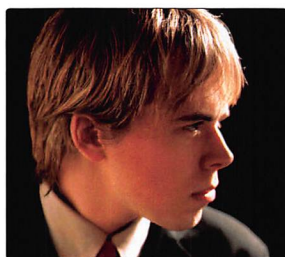
play
Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: Chromebounds, Viewtiful Joe 2
Favorite Box Art: Sin & Punishment (Import N64), Magna Carta: Tears of Blood (PS2)

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.



Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Dragon Quest & Final Fantasy in Itadaki Street portable, SF Zero: Ftr's. Gen.
Favorite Box Art: Biohazard 1 (original 1995 release), Phantasy Star II (Japanese version)

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

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Cars 070
X-Men The Official Game 071
Naruto Ultimate Ninja 071
Table Tennis 072
Over the Hedge 072
Urban Chaos 072



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: New Super Mario Bros.
Favorite Box Art: Castlevania SotN (Import PS), Contra (NES)

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Okami, New Super Mario Bros.
Favorite Box Art: Suikoden V (PS2), Gran-dia Memorial Package (Import Saturn)

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

MGS Digital Graphic Novel 072
Gallop Racer 2006 072



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Table Tennis, Chromebounds
Favorite Box Art: Toe Jam & Earl (Xbox), Star Wars KotoR

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



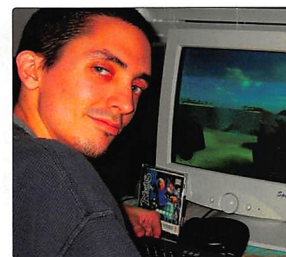
Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Tetris DS, Metroid Prime 2
Favorite Box Art: Groove on Fight (Saturn), River City Ransom (NES)

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Reviews

July 2006



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Heroes of Might & Magic V
Favorite Box Art: Sonic CD (Import Sega CD), Guild Wars Prophecies

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Tetris DS
Favorite Box Art: Miner 2049er (Atari 2600), Radiant Silvergun (Saturn import)

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.



Moto GP 2006 p69

Climax continue their sterling road racing legacy with a loaded GP racer that looks amazing and allows players to traverse tracks off the beaten circuit.

Our rating system

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game is the best, a modern classic.

10...Perfect

9...Extraordinary

8...Great

7...Good

6...Decent

5...Average

4...Below average

3...Poor

2...Bad

1...Terrible

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	THQ	Available	June
Developer	Climax	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E

"Moto GP 2006 gets a squeaky clean bill of health...and then some. The Xbox 360's first 2-wheeled racer is a godsend."

Moto GP 2006

Go kicky fast...in HD

words Dave Halverson

Of the semi-long list of caveats attached to our Moto GP 2006 preview cover a few months back, nearly every one has been addressed. With the exception of the crowds being animated (who knows—perhaps they'll perk up later as I ascend in rank) everything is exactly as Climax promised it would be: Trackside terrain reacts when you veer off course, the infields are suitably detailed, tires leave skid marks and seem perfectly tethered to the tarmac, the frame-rate never so much as sneezes, and cheap come-from-behind wipeouts remain a pre-beta condition. Moto GP 2006 gets a squeaky clean bill of health...and then some. The Xbox 360's first 2-wheeled racer is a godsend.

If there's one thing that's always kept people on the fence about road racing simulations, it's the odd state of the control, where you don't steer by simply turning but by a combination of preemptive leaning and braking. Jump into a game where the AI is too high and you quickly find yourself on the DNF list. MGP06 however employs a suitably forgiving learning curve (aside from training) for rookie racers along with front and rear brakes and a clutch for subtle rear-end drifts. The initial career season is

the perfect way to come to grips with, and then come to love this fantastic breed of racer. The ability to customize at any time is another welcome bonus. Whether you want your bike jet-black with a giant skull on the side or white with bright orange flames or graffiti, you can apply design tweaks at any time, and suit your racer to match. As you win races, unlocked bikes come in steadily and are defaulted to the most powerful automatically, or can be easily toggled in the options screen where you also spend technique points, bolstering your bikes' attributes as you see fit. Once on the track, the racing is jaw-droppingly beautiful (down to the brutal crashing animation—someone finally got it right), the re-creation of the tracks utter perfection, and the replays absolutely stunning (as well as completely interactive). The camera is user-friendly too, allowing the rider three third-person perspectives, two from behind the faring, one on the fender and one from the side. There's depth to burn in Moto GP as you sink deeper into the game, opening up Extreme courses, experiencing and

Below, one of the many Extreme courses; arguably the game's biggest draw.



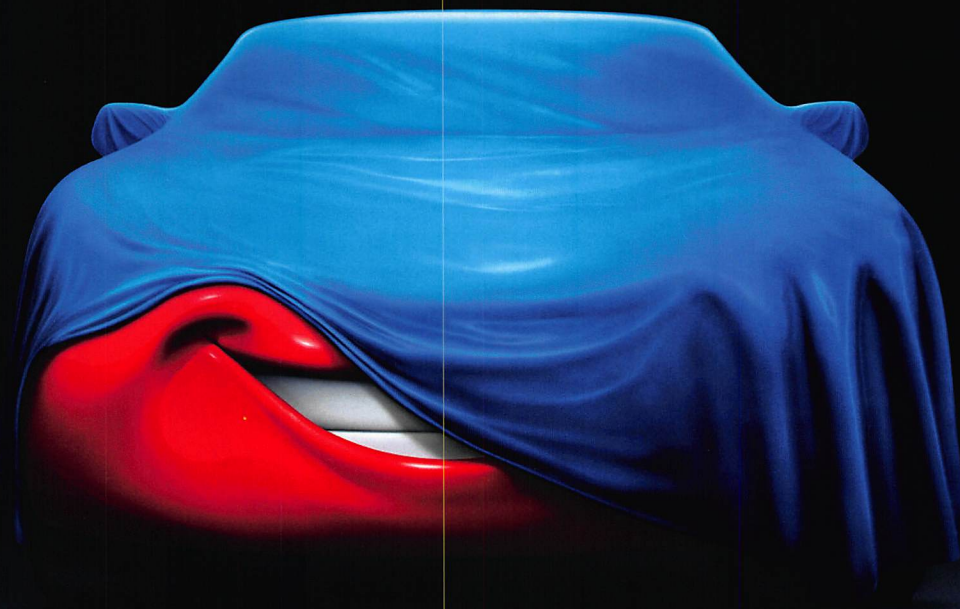
designing new bikes, and surveying a globe's worth of real courses. And to bring it all home, a soundtrack tailor-made for racing, not the top-40. I hope the loading comes down a bit (I'm assured it will) but otherwise this is an impressive first step down the fastest road I know. **play**

Moto GP 2006

score 9.0

- + Just the right amount of customization, good learning curve, hot soundtrack, great courses, Extreme unlockables.
- Load times, stiff crowd.

System(s)	PlayStation 2, Xbox, Wii (launch), PC, GC	Publisher	THQ	Available	June
Developer	Rainbow Studios	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E



Cars

The Video Game

Guess it's time for cows to fly

Dave Halverson

Mistaking Cars the Video Game as just another kid-friendly movie game designed to appease an army of tykes emerging from theatres with ear-to-ear grins and well-to-do parental units, would be an even bigger mistake than regarding the movie as just another CG vehicle spawned to make parents sigh in agony after paying ten bucks to escort their offspring into a sea of candy-chomping prepubescents soaking in a passel of bad clichés and product placement. This is a real racer, and a really big racer (with over 50 races in all) developed by the reigning kings of the kind, Rainbow Studios, who worked closely with Pixar and all of the celebrity talent from the film (yes, Larry the Cable Guy is in your video game) to create a companion game as high-performance as the movie it's based on, which I can attest will resonate as good or better with adults as it does with kids. Then again this may just be another sign of my immaturity. Did I mention that I bought all of the toys?

Aside from the story-driven, open-world hub that takes us through some of the best moments from the movie in and around Radiator Springs and a wide assortment of cups, rallies, and mini-games, the real star of the show is the level of feel and control that Rainbow has bestowed upon this rambunctious quiver of hominal hardtops, and the way they're utilized throughout the game. There's a powerslide of course (a sticky, taut one that really feels great) but there's also a move to flip a 180 and drive backwards, ride on two wheels or turn on a dime; an analog jump used for clearing obstacles and tricking to gain boost, and, of course, a wicked boost that rattles the screen like you're riding shotgun in the Back to the Future DeLorean. And when you're not racing, the mini-games are about as sticky as mini-games get. The game also evolves nicely, opening up new Cars and customization features as you go; sports a suitably hokey soundtrack composed by Bruno Coon who co-composed the film alongside Randy Newman, and looks pretty much astonishing for current-gen (imagine the integrity of an MX Unleashed affixed to a Pixar property). I can hardly wait to see the game on Wii sans fade-in (there's a bit of subtle clipping, but that's to be expected). So see the movie and for the price of a few gallons of gas by all means play the game! Get 'er done! **play**

Cars: The Video Game

score **8.5**

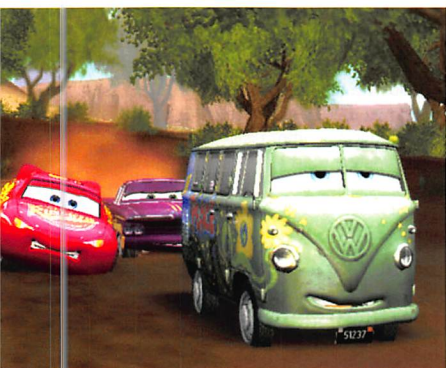
+ Anyone can build modes but it takes real skills to make anyone care.

- It's all so happy and bright. The series could do with a Cruella DeVille... A black stingray with bad intentions would have been swell. Sequel?

"...yes, Larry the Cable Guy is in your video game..."



Looks like somebody remembers Woodstock...



Naruto: Ultimate Ninja

You'll most certainly believe it

System	PlayStation 2	Online/Multi	2-player
Developer	CyberConnect2	Available	June 26
Publisher	Bandai Namco	ESRB Rating	RP

When the closest comparison to your new fighter is Smash Bros., chances are you've done your homework, and in the ever-saturated land of anime fighting games, that's very good news for Naruto fans. Ultimate takes things a step further though by unleashing character-specific scenario modes, mission mode (to increase rank) 2-player free battle, and enough unlockables to fill a hard drive. Multi-tiered panning and zooming levels (that make running from your attacker as fun as smacking him, or her), outstanding cel-shaded visuals, taut controls, and explosive projectiles and supers aside, Ultimate is quite possibly the deepest fighting game ever created. Trading cards, toys, movies, music... There's no end to the amount of goodies you can unlock, and because it's based on Naruto, the characters and their trademark Ninjitsu keep it interesting enough to actually care (okay hoard).

The ability to call on support characters to drop in valuable power-ups adds yet another dimension, so in the event you find yourself on the brink of annihilation, there's always that sliver of hope to pull it out by evading attacks (run!) and waiting for the right moment to reengage. The battles in Ultimate transcend the normal 30-second beater rounds and play out much more strategically, to the extent that playing 2-player, trash-talking and taunting take on a whole new meaning. The game is just totally multidimensional; easily the freshest fighting game to come along since Powerstone. **Dave Halverson**

score	9.0	+	Great looking, super-deep, religious to the show, and superbly balanced.
		-	No GameCube or Xbox version and anime licenses need to transcend fighting.



Sasuke rips a mighty super. KI-YAH!



X-Men: The Official Game

Children of the atom, go to your room. And stay there.

System(s)	PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC, GBA, NDS	Multi	NA
Developer	Z-Axis	Available	May
Publisher	Activision	ESRB Rating	Teen

X-Men: The Official Game is pretty awful. Beyond its limited roster of three playable X-Men, the game revels in a host of poor design choices, sports a series of bugs, and offers little in the way of interesting gameplay.

The game serves as a bridge, one that should have been blown up or torched, between the events of the second and third X-Men films. Fans of the popular X-Men comic book will wince at Z-Axis' decision to pit Iceman against a—wait for it—giant fire snake. This is a mere hint at the developer's disdain for the subject material. In perhaps the high-water mark of bad gameplay design, Axis turns the blue-furred teleporter Nightcrawler into a glorified button-pushing

drone for one of video games' most ill-conceived stages ever.

As Nightcrawler, players must penetrate a fortified installment in order to find a control panel to allow the artificial-intelligence controlled strongman Colossus into the facility. Then, Nightcrawler must find another panel—Z-Axis does love its control panels—to lower a shield so his ally can smash a machine. Lowering the shield alerts guards who assault Colossus, forcing players to race back to defend him. In all, the process must be performed four times, which is exactly four times too many. Best of all, Colossus is a gimp here, and easily dispatched by energy-sword wielding guards. If his health is depleted,



it's game over, and the arduous process must be started anew. Nothing about this is fun or clever, and the frustration born from having to suffer through one of gaming's least welcome clichés, the escort mission with the hapless A.I. companion, only adds insult to injury.

Wolverine's stages are plodding affairs. There's no sense of the mutant hero's agility, speed, or cunning; players are forced to wade in to hails of gunfire in order to strike at the game's guards. This halfhearted and by-the-numbers brawling saps what little momentum X-Men builds up, and it's sad to note how heavily the game relies on this formula to pad out its play.

Fans of the previous X-Men games can expect a marked drop in polish with this

title. Enemies frequently get stuck inside walls. There are framerate issues with the PlayStation 2 version of the game, with the slowdown seemingly happening at random intervals. Given these issues, the game's barely animated comic book-style cut-scenes seem less like an homage to the funnybook that inspired the game and more like a time-saving measure to enable Z-Axis to get in a few extra lunch hours. **Greg Orlando**

score	3.5	+	Disk does not explode when inserted into game console.
		-	Terrible gameplay, bad design choices.





Metal Gear Solid Digital Graphic Novel

score 8.0

System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Kojima Productions	Available	June
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	T

The interactive parts in Metal Gear Solid Digital Graphic Novel are slight; here is a comic-book given movement and energy, the splashes of animation and stylistic cuts taking the static form of traditional pen-and-paper ink to an

enticing new place. There are subtle, impressive touches to the presentation and dialogue that evoke a feel of game-like adventure, making up for the labored plotting. **BF**



Table Tennis

score 7.5

System(s)	Xbox 360	Online/Multi	2-8 player
Developer	Rockstar	Available	May
Publisher	Rockstar	ESRB Rating	E

Who knew that table tennis could or would make for such a compelling and surprisingly deep sports sim, on Xbox 360 no less. Visually TT is nothing to write home about, the AI is brutal and the learning curve is mega-steep, but if you've come for some seriously fine tuned tournament competition, TT offers a deeply nuanced excursion through the fine art of ping-pong. **GR**

Urban Chaos: Riot Response

score 8.0

System(s)	PS2, Xbox	Online/Multi	1-8 player
Developer	Rocksteady	Available	May
Publisher	Eidos	ESRB Rating	M

Response gleefully embraces its ultraviolence. Blood sprays everywhere, criminals twitch gruesomely when exposed to a Taser's high voltage, or scream and flail helplessly when they're set aflame. Players are rewarded for popping skulls with head shots and the only proper way to deal with a hostage situation is to engage in a deep and meaningful dialogue with the perpetrator to get him to realize the folly of his actions, and thus surrender. By which it is meant, of course, he must be shot in the face. This is not a game for children or the weak of heart.

Despite its storyline dealing with terrorism in the big city, Response never takes itself too seriously. There's always something to do, some reward to earn, and a goon to creatively kill. The game never advances the genre, but its use of a protective riot shield, one that progressively takes damage to the point where it's almost impossible to see through, is certainly a nice touch. Call this one ... chaotic good. **GO**



Over The Hedge

score 7.0

System(s)	PlayStation 2, GC	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Edge of Reality	Available	May
Publisher	Activision	ESRB Rating	E

Where's the love for Over the Hedge? Seems like any game targeted at a youth demographic, no matter how well it hits its mark, gets beaten like a junk yard dog these days. Given its target demo OTH couldn't be anymore endearing. It's packed with missions and objectives, clever yet straightforward level design and delivers co-op and single player switch-on-the-fly movie derivative critter-foolery. **DH**



Gallop Racer 2006

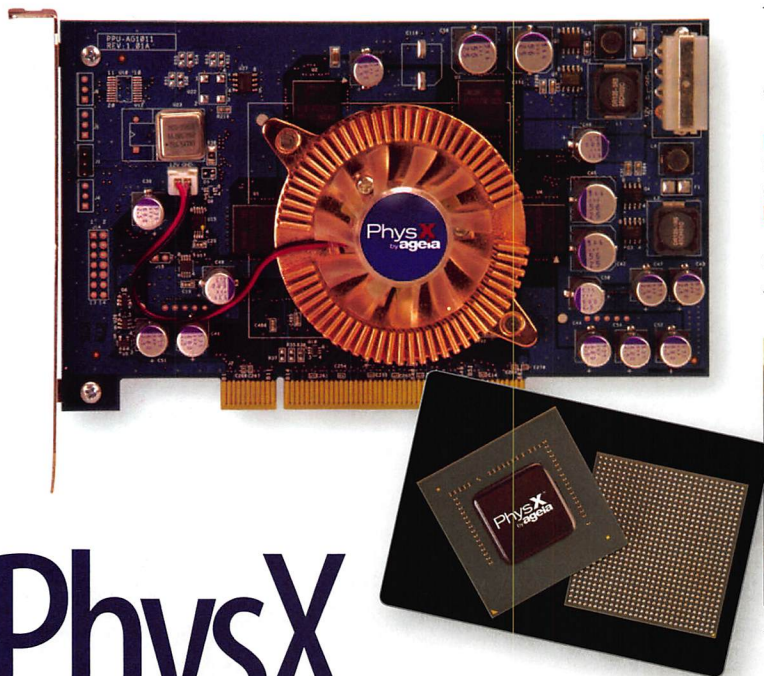
score 7.0

System(s)	PS2	Online/Multi	NA
Developer	Tecmo	Available	May
Publisher	Tecmo	ESRB Rating	E

For long time horse racing fans, Gallop Racer 2006 brings some great improvements in both the racing and breeding aspects above previous versions. Players new to the game, however, will feel lost and frustrated from the moment the game begins. More options to ease players into the game, such as a well developed tutorial, really should have been present. **EP**



Chipset Developer	Ageia	Board Manufacturer	ASUS
Available	Now	Price	\$299



PhysX

physics accelerator

words Mike Griffin

We kick every tire, blow up every barrel and get pummeled by an avalanche to bring you this hands-on gameplay analysis of Ageia's PhysX physics processor.

What is it?

The PhysX accelerator is an add-in card for the PC, much like a graphics card or a sound card. However, PhysX is entirely dedicated to processing intense physics. This particular configuration comes by way of ASUS, now offering the GRAW Edition (full game included) of its PhysX accelerator for \$299. It's a fan-cooled PCI card featuring 128 MB of GDDR3 memory running at 733 MHz. Engineered by Ageia, the PhysX chip itself is a streaming logic processor with dozens of cores optimized to devour math-heavy calculations like physics.

What can it do for games?

The PhysX card is designed to accelerate large-scale game physics that middleware solutions are unable to effectively simulate. Effects such as fluid dynamics, explosions with physically modeled shrapnel and collateral world damage, complex mechanical parts like gears, or fire, smoke and fog that curls around objects correctly. It can also be used to dramatically enhance real-time character models with intricate collision limits on joints, flowing hair and clothing.

Who is supporting it?

On the hardware side, ASUS and BFG offer PhysX cards, while boutique system dealers like Alienware now offer configurations that include PhysX. In terms of game support, over seventy titles supporting PhysX acceleration are set for release across 2006-07. One of the biggest players is Epic: the company's Unreal Engine 3 suite includes the PhysX SDK as its primary physics component. Other notables include Ubisoft, Mythic, Microsoft and Quantic Dream. The PhysX middleware is also part of the PS3 development kit.

PhysX-enhanced games: The test-run

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter

Plus: GRAW employs hardware PhysX acceleration primarily for cosmetic enhancements like explosions. More shrapnel comes out of bomb blasts and the surrounding physics objects exhibit satisfying collateral impact. It adds some nice eye-candy to the experience.
Minus: Accelerating GRAW's physics provides no intrinsic gameplay value.

Developer: GRIN
Available: May



Bet on Soldier: Blood of Sahara

Plus: Kylotonn is preparing a patch for both the original BoS game and Sahara expansion that will include extra hardware PhysX support. The big perk here involves wild fire physics: Great gouts of thick, almost organic flames that curve around walls to char foes.
Minus: Though entertaining, the residual fire effect is a tad overstated.

Developer: Kylotonn
Available: June



The vanity of the bonfire

City of Heroes/Villains

Plus: PhysX hits CoH/CoV with the Issue 7 extension, a large (and completely free) downloadable content update. We caught a preview of Issue 7 and it's definitely cool to see MMO assets blow-up with hardware-fortified debris and particles—especially inside the new Mayhem Missions. According to the game's options, almost 900 more physics reactions can be accelerated via PhysX, and it does so without impacting performance.
Minus: Fairly limited occurrences of really big explosions.

Developer: Cryptic Studios
Available: June (Issue 7 Patch)

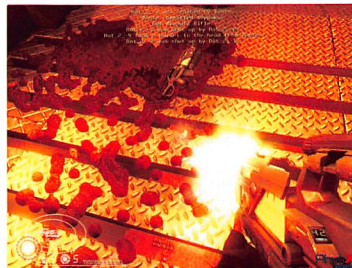


CellFactor

Plus: This early version of CellFactor is the only game we've tested that *requires* hardware PhysX to run. All other games have software backup. The explosions look and feel extremely powerful in CellFactor. Detonated grenades and plutonium canisters send dozens of metallic objects flying. The cloth and

plasma physics also look great."
Minus: There's a little chug during the stupendously huge physics explosions, right on impact. Multiplayer with full physics enabled only works in LAN games for now."

Developer: Artificial Studios
Available: Demo: now, Full game: 2007



Use psi-powers to toss huge objects around

Stoked Rider

Plus: This freeform big mountain snowboarding game uses PhysX for continuous mountain physics that occasionally send avalanches down upon your hapless boarder.
Minus: Larger spherical chunks of physics snow look sort of weird.

Developer: Bongfish
Available: June



Upcoming PhysX-enhanced games

Unreal Tournament 2007



Little is known about the full extent of hardware-accelerated physics in UT2007, but company reps have stated that it is a "deep implementation" of PhysX.

Developer: Epic Games
Available: Fall 2006

Warhammer Online



Although reports of physics-enhanced goblin base jumping proved incorrect, WAR will embrace PhysX to embellish damage effects during siege warfare.

Developer: Mythic Entertainment
Available: 2007

Infernal



Infernal uses extensive PhysX tricks to enhance environmental damage—perfect for an agent of Hell on a soul-eating binge.

Developer: Metropolis Software
Available: Fall 2006

Heavy Rain



From the developer of last year's excellent Indigo Prophecy, Heavy Rain's use of PhysX is most apparent in the complexity of its character models.

Developer: Quantic Dream
Available: 2007

Switchball

Plus: A finalist in this year's Independent Games Festival, Switchball is a fun puzzle game with extensive physics, including four levels playable only via PhysX card.
Minus: None; the game makes good use of this physics solution.

Developer: Atomic Elbow
Available: Now



Final thoughts

Let's cut to the chase: right now it's somewhat difficult to justify a \$299 purchase when so few hardware-accelerated-physics games exist. On the other hand, impressive examples like CellFactor absolutely show-off the muscle of the PhysX design. Even when certain liquid effects appear rather odd and spherical, they look powerful and unorthodox...the kind of power that you aren't going to get from clever CPU or GPU-based physics. Unfortunately, most of the other current PC titles that support the PhysX card seem to tack on slightly more robust particles or debris and call it a day. The future of the PhysX accelerator card looks fairly secure though. Over sixty-five different game development teams are using the PhysX SDK right now. The PhysX accelerator needs more big name supporters like GRAV to build momentum. And maybe a price drop. Regardless of how game physics evolve, kudos to Ageia for kicking it up a notch. **play**

Developer	Arkane Studios	Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	16 vs. 16 warfare/crusade	Available	September



Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

A fresh perspective on goblin slaughter

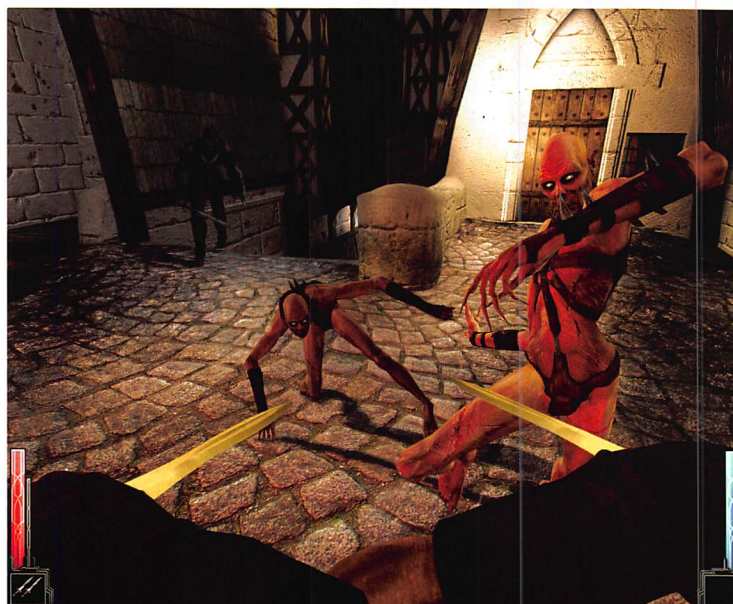
Preview

words Mike Griffin

Many feared for the franchise when Ubisoft acquired the Might and Magic license. Not because they believed Ubisoft couldn't be trusted to deliver a solid game; we all know they can do that. It was more like a general concern coming from M&M heads about use of the material and moving into the new fantasy universe of Ashan. With the recently released, highly recommended Heroes of Might and Magic V, Ubisoft honored that venerable strategy RPG series with a deep and satisfying sequel. Ubi and developer Arkane Studios (Arx Fatalis) will continue the franchise restoration this fall with a dose of first-person fantasy action, swords and spells ablaze, in Dark Messiah of Might and Magic.

A first person action game, whether a pure shooter like BF 2 or a melee hybrid like Condemned, tends to scratch a very precise itch. With Dark Messiah, Arkane has embraced several potent elements of FPS design and hybrid RPG advancement, harnessing the proven

"Arkane has embraced several potent elements of FPS design and hybrid RPG advancement..."



track record of its Arx Fatalis team and former DICE man—designer on the Battlefield series—Romain de Genlis. The result is a dark fantasy world on the verge of apocalypse, a full single-player campaign starring you as protagonist Sareth, progression in the form of new melee combos, skills, spells and raised stats, and a highly-ambitious multiplayer segment designed by a separate team wholly dedicated to the task (more on this later). As per the title, the main bad guy is the Dark Messiah. Sareth is a wizard's apprentice, trained in magic and war, charged with the seemingly trouble-free chore of delivering an artifact to the wizard's associate. Events go awry on the journey (as they must), and Sareth has to chop his way through goblins, undead, dragons and more high fantasy regulars to prevent the return and rise of the evil messiah.

Dark Messiah is powered by an upgraded version of the Source engine, which the developers initially selected for its rendering and shader horsepower, but have come to adore in Dark Messiah for its extensive animation, physics, AI and multiplayer capabilities. Most essential to Dark Messiah's presentation is the attention to detail in the perspective itself. You aren't just a lifeless floating camera. Arkane has spent a great deal of time on body-awareness and animations. You will see your feet if you look down or when you put your heel through a troll's chest with a melee combo. You'll watch your archer's hands carefully notch a special arrow into place. As a melee combatant, you can aim your attack, piercing or slashing your sword into specific body locations—and this is 100% real-time action—to help maximize damage or perhaps deflect or disarm. A mage can

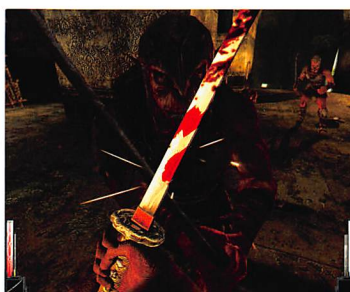




apply highly-controllable after-touch to magic missiles, navigating searing fireballs with a commanding wave of the hand. To complete the immersion, many elements of the Ashan environment will be modeled with destructible physics, so as an assassin, for example, you can plant traps and bring down heavy objects upon enemies. NPCs won't hesitate to do the same: beware the hulking Cyclops, in particular, who will grab nearby crates and barrels (and sometimes goblins!) to toss at you.

With twelve huge world stages across 30 maps, dozens of items and abilities to assemble, and the promise of a grim and immersive storyline, Dark Messiah's campaign holds much potential. However,

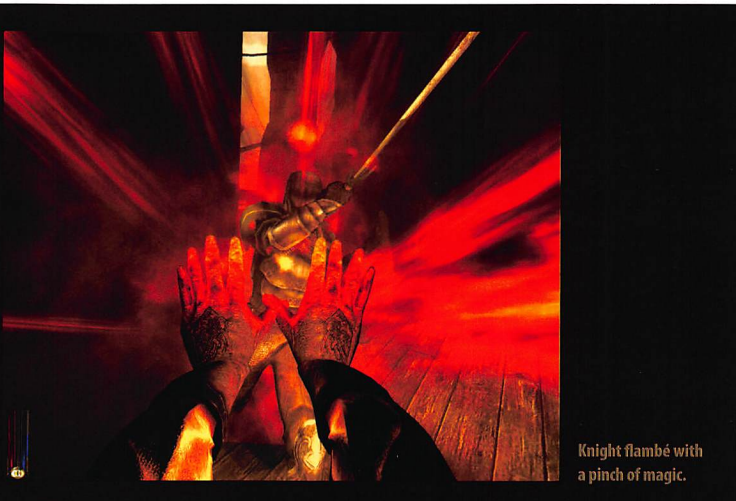
the multiplayer game is certainly not lacking its own intrigue. Featuring human vs. undead in crusade and warfare modes, players will square off as warrior, assassin, priest, mage or archer—each class brandishing iconic powers such as rogue-tastic backstabs or the mage's elemental nukes. Every class also has extra utility, like the priest's power to detect invisible enemies (caught you, thief), so there's a healthy interdependence at play. It gets much better. While the warfare mode is a fairly traditional conquest-style 16 vs. 16 match-up, the crusade mode, ostensibly beating Project Offset to the punch, is an online fantasy FPS campaign. Here, the winning side can literally dominate a map, pushing the fight deeper into enemy towns



"...the deeper you go into the enemy's homeland, the better fortified their defenses become."

and citadels—moving the next round to a map that's linked to the previous geographic hotspot, until one side finally nails HQ for the win. Like a single-player campaign, you'll earn (and keep) character experience as the multiplayer crusade progresses, but instead of getting XP for finishing objectives, here you'll gain levels and abilities as you slaughter, heal, capture flags, resurrect others and so forth. The risk versus reward becomes firmly multiplayer-centric. To prevent steamrolling, the deeper you go into the enemy's homeland, the better fortified their defenses become.

As we go to press, Ubisoft has just begun its closed beta program for Dark Messiah of Might and Magic's multiplayer modes. According to the game's release schedule, this should allow for a solid three months of serious testing. Meanwhile, the campaign team is in the homestretch—fine-tuning Dark Messiah's world and characters with all the charm and idiosyncrasies of this new Might and Magic era.



Knight flambé with a pinch of magic.

Spore

Way beyond the milky way

words Mike Griffin

Preview

Developer	Maxis	Publisher	EA Games
Online/Multi	Downloadable creatures	Available	February 2007

As we peruse the latest weekly game sales charts, like almost any week since 2003, there's a Sims game in the top ten. What Will Wright started with The Sims—and later helped contemporize in The Sims 2—is an ongoing phenomenon. What is it about the Sims' design anyway? You're an invisible and influential deity/voyeur watching over evolving human simulacra, dressing a virtual environment for vaguely intelligent avatars, guiding their social habits and career paths. That formula, with its accessible interface and whimsical style, has millions of players tuned in. Wright's next game is Spore, and it will have you spark to life as a microbe on a wild planet, circumventing interior décor and dating clichés in lieu of propagation and universal dominance—as you evolve and rise to galaxy-trotting mega-being. Think The Sims: Genesis Edition, and the whole world has a free pass to stir the gene pool.

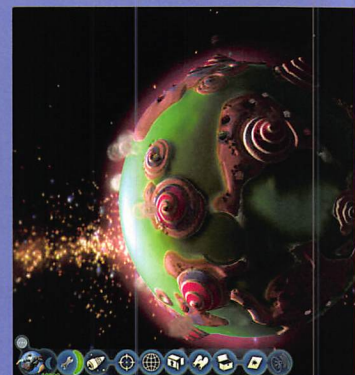
The Spore design manifest seems almost absurdly open-ended. In execution, it's a beautiful marriage of procedurally adjusting worlds, dynamic player content, and expertly tuned pacing of evolution goals. Your

creature progresses through several phases of evolution, starting with the aforementioned primordial goo where it munches on other germs to merge their shape and abilities into its own. Once it evolves solid limbs and reaches land, your creature will begin to develop behavior patterns—such as becoming a carnivore or herbivore—based on its physiology. Did you equip your creature with a meat-eater's toothy maw or a plant-eater's pincers? The physical adjustments are extensive and immediate, and like all of Spore's design interfaces (vehicles, buildings, etc.) it's a very simple, colorful and intuitive canvas of parts and pieces.

"...a beautiful marriage of procedurally adjusting worlds, dynamic player content, and expertly tuned pacing."



Love struck creatures help pave the way to galactic ascendance.



Oddball bits and sections merge together and the game procedurally generates both a visual and behavioral result, based on millions of possible hybrid combinations. You can further guarantee the destiny of your life form by spreading out its genetic blueprint, creating tribes and giving them tools and vehicles to enrich their living space and raise cities. Encourage them to be as combative or peaceful as you desire, winning other lands as an army or with irresistible social sway in trade and religion. Creatures, terrain and vehicles procedurally conform to the laws of the ecosystem that you have chosen. Soon the colorful planet is teeming with exotic alien life. The civilization that you created—based on that tiny single-cell organism—must attend to one last earthbound task: unify the world. After that, the sky's the limit, Spore baby.

At this final evolutionary phase of Spore you're ready to go inter-stellar and share your work with the universe. Hop in a UFO and begin a new mission across sprawling, fully-rendered and open-ended space, building, trading and colonizing

as you go. Your creatures, and those of every player across the (real) world, are uploaded to Spore's central servers. The game will dynamically introduce other players' creatures into the ecosystem of your planets, first ensuring that the new addition is close to your creature's experience level and compatible with the environment. It's an intriguing system fated to provide Spore with near unlimited replayability. You may even develop a reputation for awesome creature designs amongst fellow Spore players.

Spore is set to appear around Q1 2007, after Maxis and EA have bravely attempted to playtest the millions of emergent gameplay possibilities the game will have to offer.



Developer	Perpetual	Publisher	Sony Online Entertainment
Online/Multi	TBA	Available	Fall 2006



Gods and Heroes Rome Rising

Ye Gods!

Preview

words Mike Griffin



Gonzo sword-wielding
colossus for the win.

Let nothing come between a man and his 40-foot, gonzo sword-wielding colossus. Sony Online returns to the old, old school with the massively multiplayer Gods and Heroes: Rome Rising. In Rising, players go online, taking the role of an adventurer during the Roman republic (circa 510 B.C.-37 A.D.).

The game is hardly history come to life, but that was no one's intention. Developer Perpetual's goal here is simple: "We're looking to make something as fun in the online space as anything you'll find in a standalone game," the company's president Chris McKibbin says. As good Romans, players can venture forth with four friends, each of whom can have eight

A.I. allies tagging along on the adventures, making for a grand total of 45.

Adventurers can be formed from one of six classes: Gladiator, priest, mystic, scout, rogue, and soldier. Each, of course, has its own inclinations; mystics, for example, are long-range spell-casters versed in curses, and absolutely pitiful in close-quarters combat. During the course of play, a character can align himself with one of Rome's deities, and Perpetual has included 12 here. Each class has two gods associated with it, and players are free to choose between them. Gods demand servitude, but reward the favored with special powers, which are bestowed in a ceremony involving white light and the

hero's ascension into the heavens.

Squad-based combat allows for players to command melee combatants; long-range fighters such as archers, spearmen, and spellcasters; and healers at the same time. To augment their ranks, players can enlist the aid of soldiers-for-hire as well as mythological creatures such as skeletons and minotaurs. In a brief demonstration of the game's combat, minions erected a shield wall to protect spellcasters from a series of arrows while swordsmen and a bone club-wielding cyclops raced off to face the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. It certainly looked overwhelming in its demands of the player commanding the forces, but there

was no indication that the orders were too complex in nature. Here, Perpetual intends the combat to be highly action oriented, with commands for the various fighters simple enough to allow them to be issued on-the-fly. Combat will be liberally integrated into the game's initial 1,250 or so quests, and players can expect to brawl with famous monsters in the vein of Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the gates of Hades, and the snake-haired Medusa.

SOE and Perpetual showed off an early version of Rome Rising at E3 2006 and it seemed to be fine fare. Gladiators grappled in a newly built Colosseum and, surprisingly, used suplexes like the sort seen in modern-day WWE matches (the moves used in the game, Perpetual says, are all authentic Greco-Roman wrestling techniques). Huge battles were fought between squads of men accompanied by mythological creatures such as colossi, skeletons, cyclopes, and minotaurs, which all is absolutely the stuff video game legends are born of.

"...enlist the aid of soldiers-for-hire as well as mythological creatures such as skeletons and minotaurs."



AION

THE TOWER OF ETERNITY

Into the heart of the abyss

Preview

Aion is one of NCsoft's largest projects to date. It represents the accumulated experience the company has gained in its years as a top online RPG developer and publisher. Its characters and background have been researched for global appeal, balanced to accommodate players with different play styles, and its chosen engine technology (Crytek in an MMO? Yes please!) is beyond reproach. And in response to players' wishes, each Aion game server will track its own history of player accomplishments, with major unlockables and one-time events triggered and saved on a per-server basis. No Aion server will have the same economy or alliances.

Aion introduces three main factions and a unique "PvPvE" scheme. The PvP slice involves two conflicting player factions: Angels (The Chosen) and Demons (The Fallen). The third faction, the Dragons, is a NPC-controlled element whose purpose is to keep the player sides in check. Should one player faction become too powerful, the Dragons will interfere and restore order. It seems as though the Angels and Demons played some part in imprisoning the Dragons in the Tower of Eternity, a massive structure at the center of the world acting as gateway to the Abyss. The Dragons are freed when an epic evil force opens the portal to the Abyss. How this over-arching

words Mike Griffin

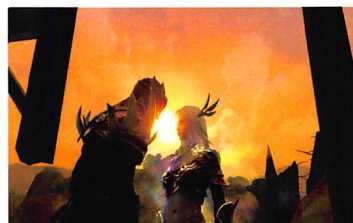
story unfolds will largely depend on the actions of the player community on each Aion server. Private quests for groups are being designed with plot and interaction in mind: NPCs to uncover, levers to pull, gates to unlock and more elements to maintain high player feedback. The game will also track dozens of invisible metrics on a per-character basis, gathering details from your deeds, gameplay style and character advancement choices. In turn, your character will begin to develop unique persistent traits over time.

To realize such grandiose concepts, the team chose the Crytek engine to render the Aion world—tweaking the base code to support MMO load balancing. Imagine Far Cry-quality graphics in a high fantasy MMO universe, including bump-mapped characters, vast plains, forests filled with trees and flora, effects like heat shimmer and flowing water, and a weather system

Developer	NCsoft Seoul	Publisher	NCsoft
Online/Multi	MMO	Available	Q1 2007



Wide open lands and treasure to plunder



transportation in WoW, Aion will allow winged Angel and Demon characters to fly between major hubs. It's on rails for now, but the developers are actually toying with the notion of allowing free flight.

Only four of eight base character archetypes (warrior, wizard, healer, ranger) have been revealed thus far and it's not clear how the flow of PvPvE will play out, on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, Aion is a very promising MMO with a great world design and the technology to back it up. Aion's Beta should kick-in later this year, leading up to a Q1 2007 release.

that actually affects player-characters. For example, using a fire-based spell during heavy rainfall will cripple its effectiveness, while lightning magic will accrue extra damage. Ground cover will also affect player movement, so sloshing through a swamp will be slow going. Why walk when you can fly? Similar to the Gryphon

"Imagine Far Cry-quality graphics in a high fantasy MMO universe..."



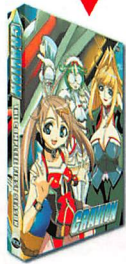
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Released by	ADV Films	Running Time	100 minutes
Rating	TV/PG	Available	March

This Ugly Yet Beautiful World

The wonderful horror of it all

words Jim Dewey

If we are to believe anime, it's that beautiful girls rain down from the heavens from parts unknown, and any young single fella with a pure heart will garner her innocent affection immediately. This proves no different for Takeru, who with his cousin Ryou find bright orange-haired and very naked Hikari materialize from a ball of light that buzzed their motorcycle while out on a delivery. But, if that isn't odd enough, some slithering arthropod attacks them and Takura, for reasons completely unknown to him, hurls out and changes into a warrior with very painful-looking impaling devices whipped up in a mere thought. Later, Ryou discovers his own girl Akari, and everyone seems to take a liking to the alien girls and wholly accept Takeru's random morphs in stride.

This latest creation from legendary studio Gainax (FLCL, Evangelion) has something for everyone—romance, monsters, girls in peril, graphic violence, comedy, and yes, some exposed skin. But in all of that is its Achilles heel—it loses a real identity of what it's trying

to be, offering too much at once. It does however immediately ramp up the intensity very quickly, not standing on mere exposition to flesh out the characters, though there seems to be a large elephant hanging out there—these girls aren't from around here (and by that I mean Earth), and no one really seems interested to find out how or why they showed up in their part of the world, but that's unabashed acceptance, I guess. It's tricky to say who would like this—it doesn't fail in any genre, but its like putting cranberry sauce on mashed potatoes—it might taste good, but you won't know till you try it. **play**

This Ugly Yet Beautiful World

score 8.0

- + Gainax always manages to offer large unique casts of characters, not to mention cute girls that you probably shouldn't think about given their age.
- Two flashbacks in the premiere episode? That's absurd! Underachievement is likely if future volumes continues this smorgasbord of genres.



"...these girls aren't from around here...and no one really seems interested to find out how or why they showed up..."



It's the only way to fly.

KamiChu!

God-in-training

Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	100 Minutes
Rating	T3 and up	Available	July 6, 2006

So, if you were a god, what power would you have? Little Yurie doesn't know herself, even though one morning she just knows she *is* one. Enlisting the help of her bespectacled best friend Mitsue, another classmate Matsuri overhears and wants in on the ground floor of the new deity. Their attempts to conjure up her as-yet unknown ability on the school roof starts a chain reaction across the ocean leading to a typhoon—not to mention she has to find a mentor in a local shrine god who's more interested in starting a rock band, locate her missing cat, and help out the Prime Minister of Japan deal with Martians! With all this, its hard just to find time to do her homework anymore.

With the team that created the brilliant *Read or Die* at the core of this show, they have taken the well-worn idea of a gifted/talented kid changing the world and manifesting it into a whimsical, charming tale of a truly believable little girl in Yurie. It's a fair cop to say that they've taken

the best elements of Miyazaki's little girl heroines—but what sets *Kamichu* apart is that even with the odd tales and talking cats, its a perfect window to let go, suspend disbelief, and reconnect with what it was like to be a kid with hopes and an unspoiled mind; to see the wandering spirits and gods, and to help someone without need of a reward in an otherwise cold adult world. Yurie is childhood personified—unsure, trusting, and devoted to her friends and family, even if she's a higher being. She doesn't sweat the god stuff. Studio Aniplex has bestowed a genuine gift upon us all with *Kamichu*, and worth its salt of any animation collection. Go forth and purchase. **Jim Dewey**

score 9.0

- + An absolutely charming story of power and responsibility. Even the opening credits are clever.
- Warning: Contents have been determined to be possibly too cute for cold hearts.



"Yurie is childhood personified—unsure, trusting, and devoted to her friends and family..."



"Highly Recommended" -DVDTalk.com

Support System

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FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

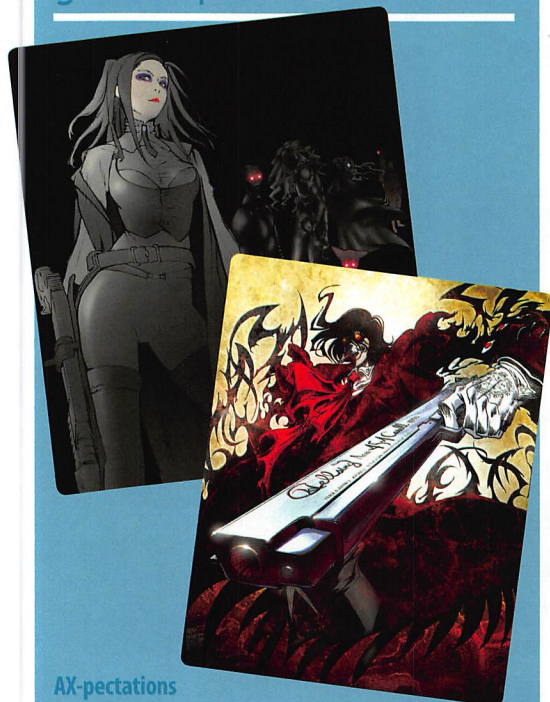
⑩ Journey to Ishbal

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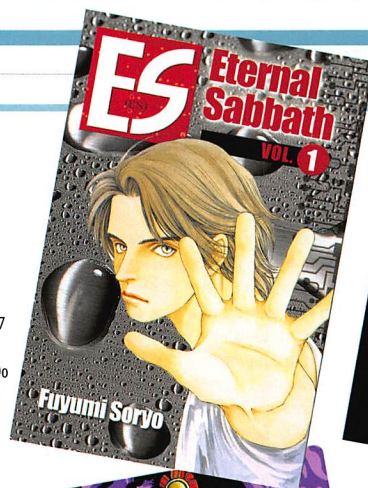
AX-pectations

With AX 2006 just around the corner, FUNimation and Geneon's guns are locked and loaded. Among others (such as Basilisk and the live-action Shinobi) the big FUNimation news is the Full Metal Alchemist movie and Witchblade anime; while Geneon is set with the long-awaited Hellsing OVA and Ergo Proxy, among others.

read this

Del Rey Manga

Just in time for summer (global warming style!) Del Rey has a stack of new titles for you to indulge in while you recover from Basilisk, including Fuyumi Soryo's (MARS, Doll) new series Eternal Sabbath, volume 2 of Jin Kobayashi's lively School Rumble, volume 4 of the ever-enticing Gacha Gacha, volume 7 of Clamp's mesmerizing Tsubasa crossover, xxxHolic, and volume 10 of the magical mayhem of Negima! Do us all a favor though and spend the \$10. The floor at Barnes & Noble is starting to look like a kegger.



if you're over 18, play this

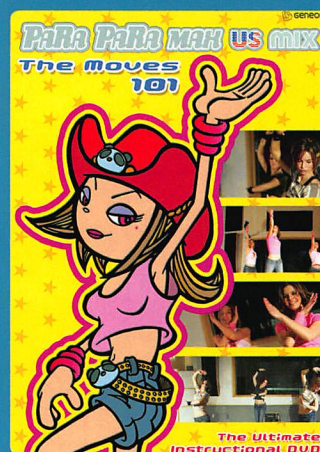


X-Change 3

Bishoujo game on CD-ROM | Released by: J-List

X-Change 3 is an interactive dating-sim game for adults, so kids, no peeking. If you're the "interactive" type, click off of MySpace and slip into Takuya Aihara's "bizarre sexual adventures in a female body" who several years ago was changed into a girl (and then back again). Paging Dr. Westheimer!

groove to this



Para Para Max US Mix: The Moves 101
Released by: Geneon Entertainment

"It's anime hip, it's happening, it's Para Para Max!" Now you too can master energetic dance routines choreographed to the backbeat of anime music performed by Yoko Ishida featuring remixes from Evangelion, Chobits and more. Fly me to the moon baby!



Yoko Ishida Live in Concert
Released by: Geneon Entertainment

Move over KISS, Yoko Ishida and her Para Para Max army throw down the sweet moves to such bouncy faves as Sugar Baby Love Hyper Yocomix Medley and Passionate Goddess on this Spice Girl-tastic live concert DVD. It's the invasion of the J-Pop goddesses. Run for your life!

Viewtiful vol. 3

Things go better with cheese

Released by	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	65 Minutes
Rating	7 and up	Available	Now

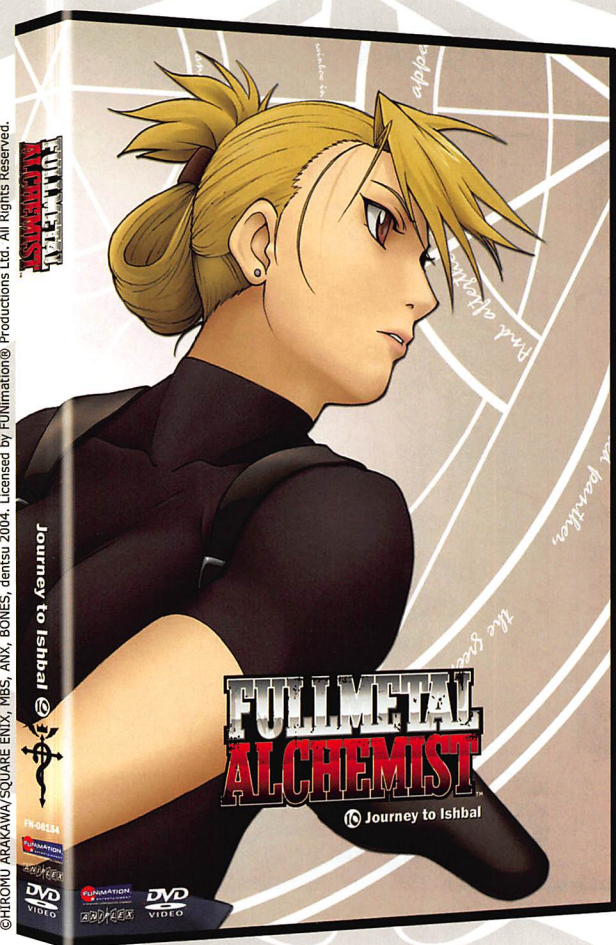
Volume 3 of Viewtiful Joe finds our idiot savant and his puny sidekick Blue Jr. once again side tracked, more interested in a street vendor peddling free “Slugoons” (metroid-like hat/personal slaves that once affixed to children’s heads do their bidding) than rescuing Joe’s beloved Sylvia who, as it turns out, is living the high-life in Almighty Leader’s comfy clutches. It isn’t long before the Slugoons (brought to you of course by Jadow) begin turning kids into little Terminators, sending Joe and his domino theory into action. Volume 2 also contains the hilarious showdown between Joe and Fire Leo—or as Joe puts it, “It’s like a dog with a head full of flameage”—flower philosophy from the book of Joe, and Joe’s jailhouse quandary where he must choose between the red or the blue...only one of which connects to the pizza delivery place. Monologuing, cheese fondue, parent traps and choice one-liners abound in the anime about nothing. It may be on a budget but the VJ anime remains



“Monologuing, cheese fondue, parent traps and choice one-liners abound.”

score 8.0

- + The cheekiest super hero ever (superbly localized) and the coolest assemblage of goons anywhere. Dig the Japanese opening track too.
- These are empty calories—but they taste great.



“This is one anime series you cannot afford to miss” -NewtypeUSA

“It just keeps getting better and better.
Highly recommended” -DVDTalk.com

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST
volume 10 Journey to Ishbal

Available June 27th

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Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Fantasy	Volume	1
Story	Yoshitomo Watanabe	Art	Yoshitomo Watanabe	Rating	Teen 13+

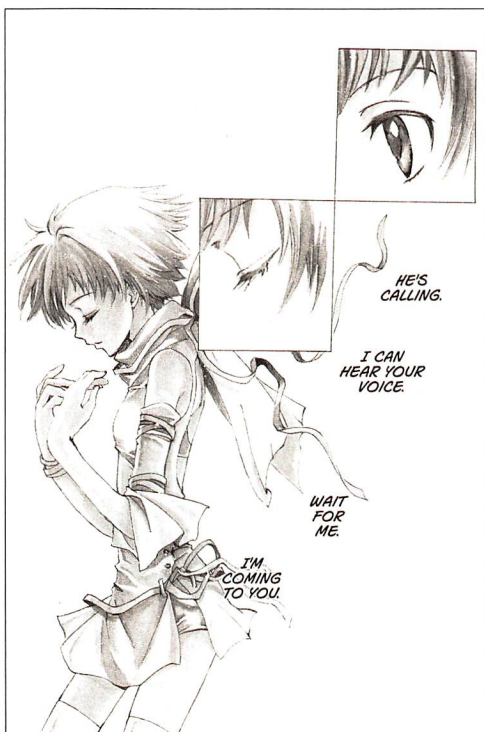
words Dave Halverson

Sixth-grader Futaba is the youngest of three siblings, short, clumsy, and suffers from an overactive cell phone due to his overprotective older brother and sister. But all of that is about to change. Rushing home at his brother's request to indulge in a batch of pumpkin pudding, Futaba's world takes a dramatic turn as a beautiful young girl descends from the sky to greet her "master". ...But this is no Belldandy moment. After miscalculating her landing by a few feet and crashing onto her head, Kiara (a creature known as an Amaranthine, able to transform into human guise which if eaten grants immortality) realizes she's made a fatal error. Futaba isn't her master at all, and therefore cannot summon the ultimate power needed to vanquish the large flying eel

she's brought bearing down on their heads (time to run). Using Futaba's ever-humming cell phone, Kiara opens a gateway to a fantasy world, where Futaba finds a strange solace in being on his own, even though his only way home—if he indeed ever gets there—relies on finding Kiara's true master. Lucky for him, he meets up with a talking rabbit that's actually a powerful shapeshifting wizard more than happy to guide them...as long as there's cash involved. At this point you might be drawing the obvious parallels (Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland) but I'm dropping you off before the ca-ca hits the fan. **B**

Read it if... You appreciate your lighthearted fantasy with shades of black

"Lucky for him, he meets up with a talking rabbit that's actually a powerful shapeshifting wizard..."



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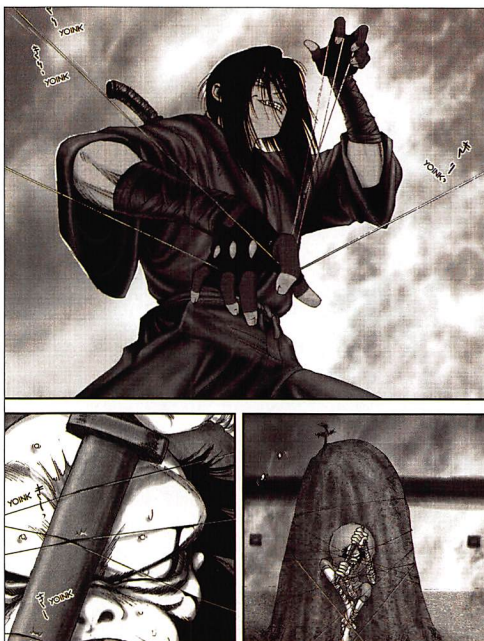
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Basilisk

Ninja scrolls running red

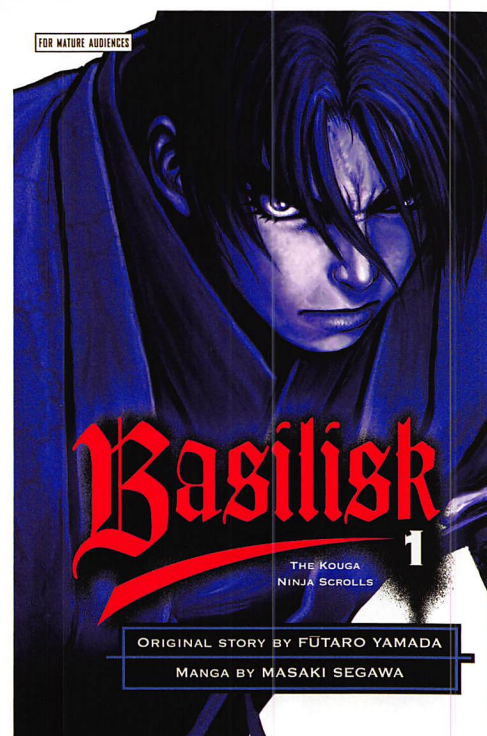
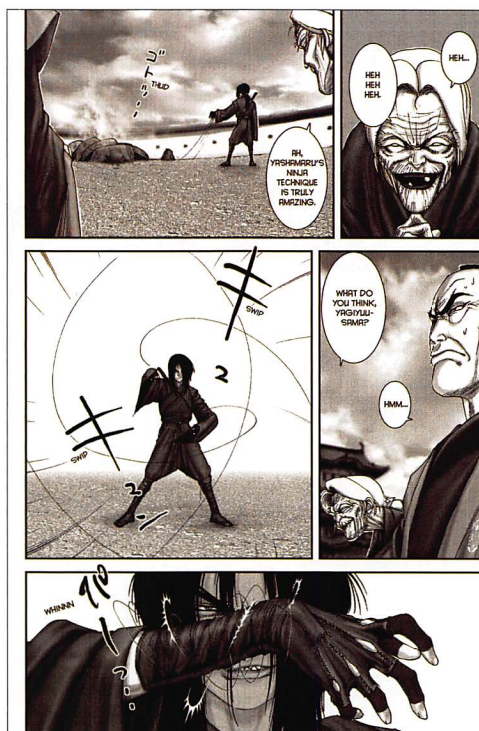
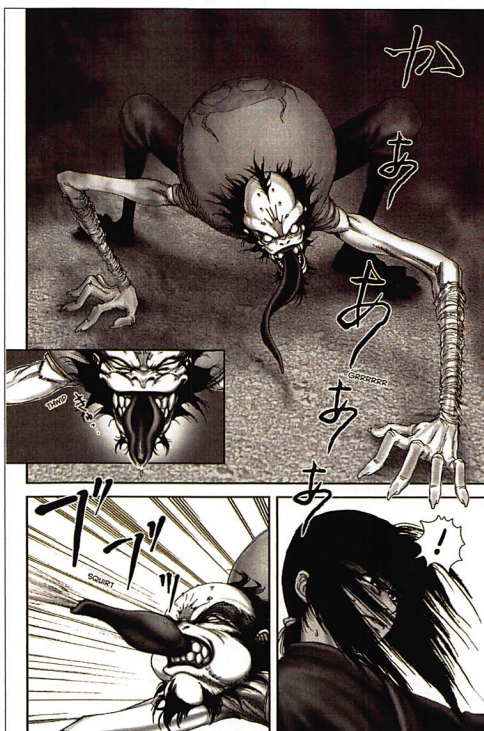
Publisher	Del Rey	Genre	Romance/Action/Horror	Volume	1
Story	Futaro Yamada	Manga	Masaki Segawa	Rating	Mature 18+



words Dave Halverson

This is an extraordinary manga; that rarest of mature adventure-dramas that fuses the ultimate in edge-of-your-seat fighting action with exquisite dialogue and a level of character design that topples nearly everything that's come before it. In fact, just as the animated feature will likely go down as one of the finest animated movies ever, so is this series poised to be considered among the best mature manga ever released. The story—which has also served as the catalyst for Shinobi—of feuding Ninja clans set in year 19 of the Keicho period (Japan 1596-1615) is one of ferocious duels and death, that crosses the boundaries of demonic possession, seething hatred, mysticism, and as fate would have it, a forbidden love that will rock you to your very soul. Not to sound like the back of the book, but this is absolute requisite manga for anyone over the age of 18...although I'd venture to say that it's not going to warp any 16-year-olds' minds. ...Better Basilisk than the state of PG-13 horror these days—that stuff's just foul. **A**

Read it if... You're hungry for some serious carnage with dialogue to match and the best demonic character design since Geiger gave us Aliens.



Some of Basilisk's tamer pages...

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03	Karas manga entertainment
04	Desert Punk funimation entertainment
05	Gundam SEED Destiny bandai entertainment
06	Eureka Seven bandai entertainment
07	Gun Sword geneon entertainment
08	Godannar adv films
09	Samurai 7 funimation entertainment
10	Howl's Moving Castle buena vista home entertainment



Full Metal Alchemist



Eureka Seven

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	Full Metal Alchemist Movie funimation entertainment
02	Kamichu! geneon entertainment
03	Eureka Seven bandai entertainment
04	Moon Phase funimation entertainment
05	Gun Sword geneon entertainment
06	Trinity Blood funimation entertainment
07	Godannar adv films
08	Karas manga entertainment
09	Speed Grapher funimation entertainment
10	This Ugly Yet Beautiful World adv films



Kamichu!



Gun Sword

Play Editor and Reader Picks



Dave Halverson

01	Godannar adv films
02	Gun Sword geneon entertainment
03	Trinity Blood funimation entertainment
04	Eureka Seven bandai entertainment
05	Moon Phase funimation entertainment



Jim Dewey

01	Kamichu! geneon entertainment
02	Gakutsuou geneon entertainment
03	Ghost Stories adv films
04	Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig manga/bandai ent.
05	Cowboy Bebop bandai entertainment



Eric Patterson

01	Kamichu! geneon entertainment
02	Saikano viz media
03	Eureka Seven bandai entertainment
04	Doki Doki School Hours geneon entertainment
05	Prokect A-ko central park media



Nelson Lui

01	Moon Phase funimation entertainment
02	Kamichu! geneon entertainment
03	This Ugly Yet Beautiful World adv films
04	My-HiME bandai entertainment
05	Godannar adv films



Reader's Top Five

01	Eureka Seven bandai entertainment
02	Samurai Champloo geneon entertainment
03	Elfen Lied adv films
04	IGPX bandai entertainment
05	Naruto viz media

Reader's Most Wanted

01	Strawberry Marshmallow geneon ent.
02	Speed Grapher funimation entertainment
03	This Ugly Yet Beautiful World adv films
04	Negima! funimation entertainment
05	Yu Yu Hakusho Collection funimation ent.

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

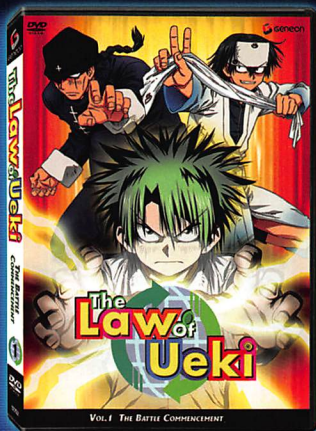
01	Basilisk del rey
02	Kamui broccoli books
03	Gacha Gacha del rey
04	The Four Constables drmaster
05	Death Jam tokyopop

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Underworld Evolution

Movie: **B+** Extras: **B+**

Directed: Len Wiseman

Featuring: Kate Beckinsale, Scott Speedman, Bill Nighy, Tony Curam, and Steven Mackintosh

Released By: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Rated: R

With *Underworld Evolution*, Len Wiseman finishes what he started by further evolving the nearly lost art of the creature feature, doing so with a flair for the genre few modern filmmakers possess. Surrounded once again by a too-good-for-the-room British cast (Bill Nighy, Tony Curam, and Steven Mackintosh) along with Kate Beckinsale and Scott Speedman, who deliver their respective performances as well as can be expected given the material, *Evolution* is a modern-day monster movie that will dazzle fans of what the film deftly delivers: gothic action fused with the type of future tech that ancient clans might develop over the centuries. I was waiting for Sam Fisher to rappel in at any moment.

Initially we're taken back to the roots of the pervasive evil, where we witness the dearly departed Amelia (finally we get to really meet her) and Victor having their way with William, the first Lycan, and his twin brother Marcus (somebody's been playing *Darkwatch*), who lay in hibernation at the conclusion of the first film...drip, drip—a

back-story that sets the stage for one of the best stories this genre has ever produced (sans a few somewhat annoying disconnects). Marcus and William are the spawn of the father of all immortals, Alexander Corvinus, who for nearly a millennium has sat idly by watching from afar, cleaning up his warring brood's butchery from his hi-tech military installation, a floating fortress with one hell of a cool office (the sets throughout are phenomenal) but terribly bad security. The only thing standing between Marcus and his goal, to awaken his Lycan brother and seek retribution (before extinguishing humanity) are Selene and Michael who make all the right moves look, for the most part, stunning.

Beautifully shot and skillfully crafted using the gamut of disciplines (practical shots using animatronic suits, miniatures, and CG) if you liked *Underworld*, you'll love *Evolution*. PG-13 horror be damned. **Dave Halverson**

Home Movies

Season Four

Season: **B+** Extras: **A+**

Featuring: Brendon Small, Melissa Galsky, H. Jon Benjamin, They Might Be Giants, Mary Lynn Rajsak, Ron Lynch

Created By: Loren Bouchard, Brendon Small

Released By: Shout! Factory/Soup2Nuts

If you've been watching years of adult-aimed cartoons and you don't recognize the name of *Home Movies*, you should be ashamed of yourself. The series focuses on Brendon, Melissa, and Jason, the trio of grade school kids who act more like their adult peers and make parody films in Brendon's basement, and Coach McGuirk, their soccer coach. They go off the deep end this time when McGuirk buys an utterly useless sword set, avoids a woodland secret man-cult while the kids stage a camp revolt, and drives his car off the stage of the kids' hysterically awful musical—just to name of a few of their suburban adventures in this, the final season. Despite the kids' uncharacteristic swearing this season, its impromptu scripts and natural jibe between characters have always been its shining strength. It's a bittersweet ending for the show and by far the wittiest, off-the-cuff, down-to-earth cartoon you'll ever watch.

Extras: The mother lode of all four seasons—twenty-four commentaries (that's almost two per episode, including Modest Mouse and the staff of the Onion), audio outtakes, documentary on the initial Season One recordings, and the cherry on top: a 52-track CD of the majority of songs that stuck in fans' heads over the years, all composed and performed by the real Brendon. As Jason would say, "We-ow." **Jim Dewey**





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BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah

07_06 GREG ORLANDO
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The talk of the town...

Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest to say. This perhaps goes miles in explaining why most of what's said by game makers about the titles they're producing sounds as if it's come directly from a machine—say, the Spielmaster 8850, which is 28 percent more inclined toward jargon than its predecessor the Spielmaster 8835.

We have a realistic perspiration engine that produces 250 billion poly droplets at timed intervals depending on exertion and situational conditions. (The train wreck of a New York Mets pitcher Carlos Zambrano will sweat after coughing up yet another home run to someone who rightly couldn't hit the ground if he fell out of an airplane. Boy, will this sweat look good!)

Deformable environmental artifacts react to both the dynamic weather systems and external stimuli. (Grass moves! See! The grass is moving because a character's foot is pushing it!)

Scripted A.I. is situational and reactive depending on line-of-sight and detection routines.

(When anonymous soldier # 6,855 sees your character coming, or notices bullets at being shot at him, he will not spread out a blanket and being eating delightful cucumber sandwiches from a picnic basket. Rather, he will point his gun and shoot at you. If he can, he will try to kill you.)

Games are becoming more complicated, more diverse. The tools used by developers allow for wonderful innovations in terms of what's seen on game screens, how it moves, the manner in which stuff blows up, the interaction between characters, and the challenges players are presented with. As Paul Simon noted,

these are days of miracles and wonder. Carlos Zambrano will sweat after serving a meatball sandwich to Johnny Punchclock. The grass will move, and sometimes it will even sway. Soldier # 6,855 is getting smarter every day.

It's only fitting, then, that the language used to describe games has, itself, become more complicated. Developers are comfortable describing characters in terms of the polys that make them up. In turn, game writers are equally at home jotting down the number of polygons and then making sure that information is published somewhere before the release date but after mention of 358 points of deformity in a preview story. These factoids, backed by solid numbers, become the basis for comparison and, ultimately, quality. Of course six squintillion polygons is better than 4.8 squintillion. Didn't you hear the developer? Hello!

There's a problem here. The jargon gets in the way. It's a distraction. It genuinely interferes with the discussion of what's really important with video games: the overall experience. Numbers are fine, technology is fine, but the blind worship of them is simply a dullard's game—there's nothing to it, sort of like a shell game where the pea has been palmed and all three cups have nothing under them.

A sweat engine doesn't make a game better. It may make it more realistic looking, but realism doesn't translate directly into quality. Artificial intelligence that can sense a character's shadow cast by real-time lighting and react accordingly doesn't matter when a player spends most of his time in gameplay hunting for 12 pieces of whatever magical artifact shattered last Tuesday.

The jargon would have everyone believe otherwise. With the Spielmaster 8850, more is better, and there's no need to ask why, say, a 3D-modeled crowd makes Madden 2025: CyberMadden Gets a New Hat so much infinitely better in comparison to the brilliant piece of game engineering that was Madden 2024: CyberMadden

"Of course six squintillion polygons is better than 4.8 squintillion. Didn't you hear the developer? Hello!"

Strikes Back, Part VIII. It just is.

In adopting the Newspeak, everyone loses. Games are simply not the sum of their graphical capabilities or special features. With the next-generation of game consoles, however, that's where all the emphasis is being put. Games look better and better. More enemies appear on screen. Environments deform, dead characters ragdoll when—surprise!—they stand too close to explosive barrels and get blown up. Thinking that this stuff makes games better is perfectly fine. Acting and speaking as if it translates to excellent gameplay is sheer folly.

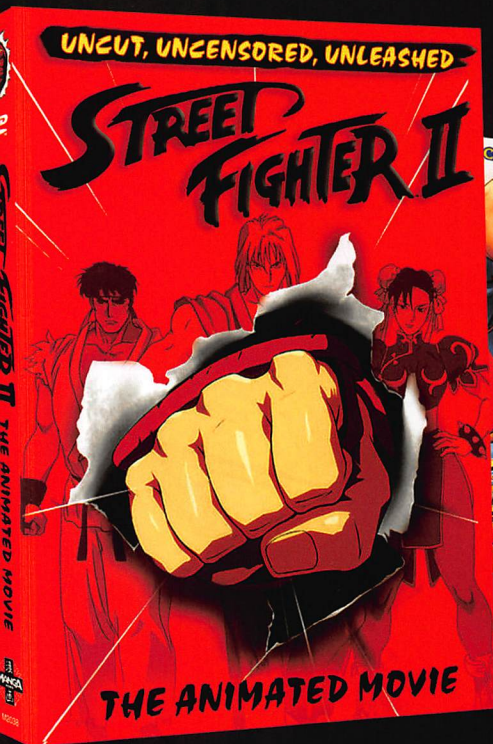
At some point, everyone involved—game makers, the people who write about games, and the people who play them—should demand to know not only what, but why and how. Why does all this stuff that's so lovingly discussed and wrapped in complicated language make a game better? How much more fun or interesting will the game with all these features be in terms of sitting down in front of the television or monitor to, say, actually play?

The Spielmaster 8850 is a fine device. It has wrecked us all. When simplicity fails, and it might be too difficult or painful to ask the tough question, jargon is the answer.

Greg Orlando has 88 points of articulation and is powered by a realistic Cheez Doodle engine. This text was produced with the aid of the Obfuscator 1175.

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